

SEVEN ADVENTURES of THE BAGCHI BROTHERS



Firmin Baes – The Two Brothers (1924)

Bibhas De

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THEM AMAZING BAGCHI BROTHERS!



**অবাক বিস্ময়,
বাগচী ভ্রাতৃদ্বয়!**



he word sadhu is a catchall description of people who have given themselves over entirely to a religious life. More specifically, Hindu religious life. At the serene extreme, you have the saffron-clad monks who are clean-living, shaved-head ascetics. They live austere disciplined lives in a commune which could be centered on a temple or a deity. On the other, very extreme end are itinerant, hippy-like indigents. A typical image might be a person with long scraggly unwashed beard, long flowing matted hair and for attire, just a loincloth around his waist. He could be carrying a walking staff with a three-pronged metal head, the trishul and a kamandalu, an ewer. He might have rubbed cinder ash all over his bare body. Sometimes he could be drunk out of his gourd on bhang, an opium-based drink, or high on hashish. These excesses are considered a part of their process of seeking god. These individuals could be worshippers of the Goddess Kali or God Shiva or probably some other deity. The society, for the most part, respects them or tolerates them. Hardly ever any negative attitude is expressed against them. But certainly, there is an aura of mystery and mystique associated with them.

Among them is the Bhairav sadhu and his consort, Bhairavi – worshippers of Shiva. You have probably heard these terms as referring to ragas in Indian classical music. But they originally referred to deities and also to the worshippers of the deities. They still do.

All these pursuits – and many more – you saw in Silchar of the 1950s. This was a most interesting place to be growing grow up in, then.



The Bagchi brothers surely had some proper names, but few knew them by those names. They were only for the school register. Everyone knew them by their nicknames, Lalu and Bhulu. Actually, people always spoke of them as a unit: Lalubhulu. Lalu was 10 and Bhulu 8 at the time of this story. The special thing about the brothers was that they were danpithays, daredevils. They were always seeking adventure and they did not know fear. If a poisonous snake was spotted lurking inside a neighbor's house, the brothers appeared with long sticks. If a haunted house was brought to their attention, they would be there at the earliest convenience. But to be fair, the brothers never did anything to hurt anyone. No one is known to have ever complained to their parents. On the contrary, at home, the brothers were the epitome of polite and obedient children. They also did well at school. People liked and admired the Bagchi brothers and looked forward to stories of their exploits.

The Bagchis lived in Malugram. So, the brothers' reputation had easily spread to neighboring Itkhola, Aryapatti and Nutanpatti. But in time, it spread as far as Ambikapatti and Tarapur. Indeed, all of Silchar came to know about Lalubhulu.



One summer when the school was out, an itinerant Bhairav-Bhairavi pair arrived in town. They set up shop in the gazebo in Gandhibag, the town's central park. When the word spread, which always spread easily and rapidly in that town, people came from far and near. Some came to seek blessings, some came to know their future, some came to seek advice on family matters and some came just to see. And these new arrivals were something to see!

The Bhairav was a very large, very dark-complexioned person, smeared all over with grey ash. Vermilion paste was smeared over his face and forehead. The Bhairavi was only slightly smaller and similarly painted. Their eyes were bloodshot. Their teeth were stained towards red. All in all, this was a most grotesque sight.

Now, it was rumored that they had arrived in town in a large, flatbed dinghy, which they had parked at the river bank near Fatak Bazaar. They had apparently fashioned out of bamboo and sackcloth a two-room shack on board the dinghy. When they retired to the dinghy at night, strange lights reportedly flickered from there and there were rumors of strange doings.

These "strange doings" to the Bagchi brothers were what a pot of honey was to a swarm of flies. So plans were made apace for a Saturday evening bivouac. The parents were told that the brothers were trying something new called night-fishing and would be home before dinner time. But the brothers realized that it was a long walk from Malugram to Fatak Bazaar and they would not be able to make it home for dinner. So they approached a friend in Itkhola to lend them his bicycle. Or more correctly, his father's bicycle. The friend said they had to tell him what they were up to. The brothers came clean. Then the friend made them promise that when they returned, they would give him a blow-by-blow account of what transpired. They agreed and got the BSA bicycle. This was an adult bike, so Lalu put his right leg through the triangular frame to reach the far pedal. He put his elbow on the seat of the bike and thus supported his weight. That his how small boys rode adult bikes. Bhulu sat on the luggage carrier in the back. The brothers were on their way. The game was afoot



When they arrived on the scene it was already dark. The normally crowded river bank was completely deserted. Sure enough, there was a dinghy with a ramshackle structure on it. And a light was flickering from within. Very stealthily, the brothers came to the water's edge. Then they waded a few steps in the water and with their arms, lifted themselves one by one onto the bed of the dinghy. It tilted slightly, so the brothers paused for any signs of activity. There were none. Then they reached the bamboo wall of the shack and when they found a crack, they peeked.

The Bhairav and the Bhairavi were sitting on the floor, facing each other, in the lotus position – both stark naked. Their eyes were closed. They were smoking hashish and occasionally saying things like “Bom Bholanath” and “Shiva Shambhu.” In the middle was a clay jug and two clay glasses. They had been drinking as well. Now the brothers saw the Bhairav get up and go to the other room. The boys then tried to gain a better vantage. As they were doing so, two huge hands fell on their shoulders. The Bhairav had actually sensed their presence and came out to nab them. The grip was so strong that escape was out of the question. And anyway, the brothers wanted to see more.

The Bhairav led the boys by his two hands into the room. As they were standing in one corner, they saw him reach into a stack of things and pull out a large ram-da. (Hay Bhagaban, O God, he is going to kill us! – the boys were now thinking.) The blade of the broad sword shone ominously in the unsteady light of the oil-wick lamp. Then the Bhairav looked at the Bhairavi. She produced a very old, worn-out rubber mat known as oil cloth. She spread it on the floor. (Must be to catch all the blood!) The Bhairav signaled the boys to sit on the mat. Now the boys were thinking hard: In terms of the level of danger this is way past killing a poisonous snake. We are now in uncharted territory. This is the end of the line.

Not afraid in the slightest, the Bagchi brothers prepared for what was coming. And when the Bhairavi made her next move, there was no doubt as to that. She produced a large tin can, about a foot-and-a-half by a foot-and-a-half and about 2 feet deep, with open mouth. (Has to be for the heads!) She then brought out two large tin plates and placed in front of them. (So that's where the heads will fall!)

Now Lalu turned to his younger brother and whispered: “Close your eyes and think only of Ma and Baba. Then this won't hurt at all.” Bhulu answered:

“All right, Dada. But you stay close to me.” The brothers held hands tightly, closed their eyes and lowered their heads.

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When nothing happened in a few seconds, the brothers opened their eyes. They saw the Bhairavi reach into the can and bring out two Muri Laddoos (puffed rice caked with molasses) and place them on the two plates. Then the Bhairav produced two green coconuts and, using his ram-da, neatly lopped the tops off them. He then handed the boys the coconuts, full of refreshing juice, ready to drink.

Suddenly the brothers grasped the whole situation. The Bhairav and the Bhairavi were glad that two local boys were nice enough to pay them a courtesy visit and were extending the finest of their hospitality. When the brothers finally left, the Bhairavi, with her most grotesque face, gave them as sweet a smile as they ever saw.

After they returned the bike to the friend and told him the story they promised him, they made him swear he would never tell this story to anyone in Silchar. This is one exploit that was going to remain private.

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The adventures of the Bagchi brothers continued as usual. But people did notice a change in them. Whenever they passed by any temples or holy places, they made it a point to stop and bow. And whenever they encountered any odd religious characters on the road, any sadhus of any description, the two brothers moved in concerted motion to the side of the road, stood at attention and joined their palms. They raised the joined palms to the level of their foreheads and bowed deeply. This was an amazing sight. But everything the brothers did was amazing. So nobody attached any extra-special significance to this transformation.

THE RICEFIELDS OF DOODHPATIL



Claude Monet *Meules*

দুধপাতিলের
ধানের ক্ষেত

Doodhpatil is a Manipuri village on the border of the town of Silchar – across the river Barak. At the time of this story it consisted of clumps of rustic huts sprinkled over expansive rice fields. There was no scheduled ferry service then – you had to wait for one of the private dinghies to take you across. But at any rate, Doodhpatil then was a largely self-sufficient agricultural village, and there was no great need for the villagers to come to town routinely, except for schooling of young people. It truly was an isolated, idyllic place then.



Sayan De

But the tranquility was shattered when the crops were poor for several consecutive years. The consequences to the village were nothing short of devastating, as illustrated by the plight of a young widow and her two infant sons. One son was a toddler and the other she carried in her arms. The widow owned a small tract of rice field. The family ate off this crop, selling the rest of it for other needs. The young woman was vivacious and winsome and everyone loved how she greeted people not with words, but a smile and a stylistic tilt of her head. In their minds the villagers put her on a pedestal. When during the crop failures this magnificent lady ran out of food, she was

too proud to ask for help from the fellow villagers. She saw her sons become emaciated and bloated from hunger – within the privacy of her home. No one knew anything, for all this happened in a short space of a few days. When the situation became impossible, one night the widow left her two sons on the doorstep of a neighbor, went to the field – her own field – and lay down on the barren ground. She then slit her wrists and bled to death. The field soaked up all her blood.

The body of the woman was ceremonially cremated where it lay. She thus ended in blood and ash that became a part of her own once-fertile land. It was too late for the villagers to save the children. They died shortly afterwards. The village was deeply affected by this tragedy – which the villagers somehow saw as being a result of a grand curse upon the village that had led to the crop failures. They also felt remorse and guilt for not being more engaged in the widowed woman's life.

This sad story mobilized people from far and wide to the cause of the village. The scientists said the soil needed rest and replenishment. The priests said that the gods were displeased. So the villagers, to be doubly sure, decided to address the problem on both fronts. A village council was held in the courtyard of the home of the Elder, Ratanmoni Sapamcha. After great deliberation and with great reluctance, it was decided that the planting would be skipped for a year. This whole year would be spent in intensively replenishing the soil and extensively appeasing the gods.

As to the first of these lines of attack the villagers were able to get their hands on large quantities of American-donated chemical fertilizers. These were spread thick on the fields. Then native fertilizers were spread likewise. Then all the cow-dung that could be found was added. Additionally, the leavings of the elephants used to move logs from the river were added. After that, and following the dictum of a priest, great quantities of ash from the local pyre grounds were strewn. All these were plowed over and when the rains came pouring down, made a part of the soil.

Now followed the great appeasement of the gods. All over the fields little shacks called pandals were erected to worship this god and that goddess. The priests were working round the clock. Fire sacrifice rituals were arranged. The priests ordained that they needed English whiskey to pour into the sacrificial fire and the same was procured for them from the Cachar Club – at great expense to the villagers. Truly, the villagers spared no expenses, even if they

had to dig into their life savings. The priests took enormous swigs of the whiskey and then poured a few drops into the fire. This was repeated throughout the day. When the priests keeled over, this was said to be the sign that the fire sacrifice was a success. On the last day, at the prescription of a priest, twenty-one goats were sacrificed and their fresh, warm blood was sprinkled on the fields. Some of the priests then took the meat, divvying up the twenty-one goats among themselves. Within hours this meat found its way to the meat market in Fatak Bazaar.

The following season planting was done at the regular time and the rains came at the regular time. But the green tips shot out of the ground well ahead of schedule and grew apace. Soon the fields were lush green – but an unusual shade of green. The farmers associated this with a healthy crop. And what a crop it was! They got three times as much paddy per bigha of land then they were used to getting. And the harvest too looked most healthy, precursor to high quality rice.

And it indeed was. The fields were harvested with great zeal and the villagers busied themselves with processing the crop. There was much rejoicing all around. The hay was left to dry on the stem. But the farmers noticed that this was an especially good quality hay that could be used to build fine adobe homes. They then harvested the hay and piled them up in hundreds of mounds all across the fields. There they would dry further. This was a rather eerie sight: mounds after maize-colored mounds as far as the eye could see on otherwise empty fields. And of course the organic scent of drying hay added to a sad vacantness of this scene. An agriculturist saheb who came to inspect the soil saw this sight and remarked: “Monet’s haystacks!” But the villagers did not know what that meant.

Another thing nobody took much note of is that a secondary crop seemed to start to come up right away. Tiny verdant shoots came out of the ground. It was as though after such momentum of producing, the land just could not stop giving. It wanted to give something more. Or perhaps *something else*.

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The first time it happened was very late one moonlit night when Babudhon the village drunk was returning home from a long session at the hoochhouse. It was a cold night and he had wrapped himself tightly in a blanket, covering his head also. Halfway through the ricefields his unsteady legs could carry him no further. So he simply sat down on the dividing ridge between two

fields, wrapped the blanket even tighter around him and dozed off right away.

Babudhon was awakened by a rustling sound. He rubbed his sleepy eyes and looked around him. The moon was high and the fields were well lit – if softly lit. The next time he heard the rustling he looked in the direction of the sound. About a hundred feet from him a haystack was moving. It was reshaping, slowly becoming taller and narrower – taller and narrower – taller and narrower. Then it became something completely erect and straight – about five-to-six feet tall. Babudhon wiped his eyes again, pinched himself and made a mental promise to himself to cut down on the hooch. But the vision did not go away. It now started moving – it had two legs, two arms and a head. It moved like a mechanical man, even though it was made entirely of hay. The joints of its arms and legs were knotty. Loose straw was hanging over its face from its head the way long hair obscures a face. The figure walked in a direction perpendicular to the line joining Babudhon and the haystack – and became the tallest object upon the moonlit vista. At this time Babudhon uttered a muffled scream. The figure stopped and turned its face towards Babudhon – a face still obscured by the pendent straws. Babudhon fainted.

Babudhon never disclosed to anyone this very first sighting, until reports of more sightings surfaced. The sightings always occurred at late night and never at the same haystack. The sightings were always accidental. Whenever anyone kept a vigil, he never saw anything.

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After several reports of the sightings, some by responsible villagers, Ratanmoni Sapamcha convened the village council. The sightings had been gradually approaching the perimeter of the residential part of the village. The latest was right in the courtyard of a cluster of homes. This gave urgency to the situation. An Ojha – a country exorcist that is – was invited to join because of his expertise. Each witness related his experience in vivid detail. Then the meeting was opened for discussion.

The Ojha said that an exorcism of the rice fields was needed to be performed right away. He could do it for two hundred rupees.

Then a brash young man from the village, brandishing a machete, said: “Elder, let me have at the straw-man. I will patrol the fields for as many nights as necessary, and when I find him, I will cut his head off.”

One villager stood up and expressed the sentiment of many others: “Whatever this is, this has not harmed us. Just because something is

supernatural does not mean it is malevolent. It may even be linked to the spirit of the soil – the very soil that is now rewarding us. We prayed hard for things from the soil and this is something unexpected that came up from out of the soil. I suggest we simply let it be. In time it may disappear. In time we may understand what this is about.”

Most people in the room nodded agreement. But the Ojha was furious. He said: “I am the expert on such things. I am telling you, stop this foolishness. We need to perform a Rice Field Exorcism right away.”

Ratanmoni then asked if there were any other comments. As there were none, he gave his final decision: “For the moment we will do nothing. Avoid the fields late at night if you can. If not, go in twos or threes. If you see this sight within the village, go indoors. Do not confront. I don’t think we have anything to fear.”

After the meeting adjourned, a furious Ojha cornered the brash young man. They talked in a hushed voice for a while. The Ojha tickled the young man’s ego and coaxed him to go ahead and execute his plan.

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Police Sub-Inspector Jitendra Lahan from Silchar was most puzzled by the brutal murder. The brash young man from the village was found one morning in the fields, decapitated by his own machete. His head was found nearby. Some straw had been stuffed into the mouth. The villagers then told PSI Lahan about the straw-man and the council meeting. But the police officer did not buy any of this and did not include any of this in his report. Instead he asked if the young man had any enemies. That he did. Not only was he a vicious bully, he was also suspected of liaising with certain married village women. The PSI wrote in his report: *Death by decapitation in the hands of unknown person(s)*. The case remained open.

However, from that day on the fields became a veritable valley of fear. No one would go there after sundown. This cramped the life of the village. Then, most reluctantly, some villagers suggested to Ratanmoni that may be an exorcism was in order. Ratanmoni agreed and sent for the Ojha. “Four hundred rupees,” the Ojha said. There was no choice, and Ratanmoni agreed. The Ojha said that he would perform the ceremony late night that very night and asked for certain ceremonial things to be readied. One of these was a bottle of English whiskey.

The Ojha spread his mat smack in the middle of the fields and asked all

spectators to keep great distance from him. It was about 2 o'clock in the morning. The Ojha planned to complete his ritual cleansing of the fields in an hour and leave. He got started – with a long swig of the ritual potion.

Around about 2:30 am, the Ojha heard a faint rustling behind him. He paid this no mind. Actually, he had never believed that the straw-man existed. By this time he was also considerably inebriated and his mental faculties were dulled. Then he heard the sound again and turned. There, right behind him and looming over him, was the straw-man.

“O-ré Baba-ré, Ma-ré – O Father of mine, O Mother of mine,” the Ojha screamed and ran for his dear life. He never returned, not even to claim the four hundred rupees. As he ran, he toppled the bottle of whiskey and the expensive fluid spilled out into the rice fields.



So the valley-of-fear feeling continued and gained strength. The murder case was not solved – and many began to think that the straw-man had simply defended himself against his assailant. So there was after all the potential for great malevolence.

The straw-man had begun to be personified. People started to refer to it as he.

In the next scheduled council meeting this issue again occupied the full attention. These meetings were very special – anyone could attend and anyone could speak. Even children. So nobody was surprised when a young student who went to school in the town said: “This is a job for the Bagchi brothers.” However, no one in the village had heard of the Bagchi brothers. So the Elder asked him to explain.

The boy then embarked on a long account of the Bagchi brothers and some of their exploits. Everyone listened in rapt attention. Eventually the boy stopped out of sheer exhaustion. Now the Elder smiled and also looked thoughtful. He said: “It cannot hurt to approach the brothers’ parents. And in any case, it would be interesting to meet these remarkable young men.”

The boy replied: “But esteemed Elder, there is a problem. The brothers are not allowed to stay out nights. We have to have a good reason why they should spend the night here. I mean, other than the real reason.”

The Elder said: “I see ... OK, here’s what we will do. I will myself go and meet Mr. Bagchi. I will say that we would like his remarkable children to come and spend a weekend in our village, so that our village children can

learn something about them. I know this is a little underhanded, but we will take responsibility for the safety of our young guests.”

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Mr. Bagchi knew the Elder by sight and received him with great respect and courtesy. He also thought the proposal was a very good idea. His boys could go next weekend if they wanted to. They wanted to. So everything was arranged.

On early afternoon the next Saturday after the brothers returned from school, an escort arrived from the village to accompany them. The brothers packed their nightclothes, toothbrush and toothpaste, and were off. They would walk to the river and then catch the dinghy that was waiting for them. As soon as they were out of sight of their home the escort broached the real purpose of this trip. He told them – in gist – about the haunting of the straw-man and the problem this posed. He said he was sent to brief the brothers as he was the most knowledgeable on the details of the whole development.

The Bagchi brothers showed no surprise at all to hear that there was an ulterior motive behind this invitation. Instead, the elder brother said: “Please start from the very beginning and tell us everything that has happened. Do not leave out any details.”

The man then gave – in slow and exquisite detail – an account, starting with the crop failures. He ended with the story of the Ojha’s misfortune, just as the party was arriving at the river landing.

The brothers had listened, never once interrupting. Then, as they boarded the dinghy, the elder brother said: “I will ask you a series of questions. Please answer only if you know the answer.” The escort then mentally prepared to answer what he expected to be questions about the sightings of the straw-man. However, the Bagchis asked him absolutely nothing about the straw-man. Instead, he got this very strange question:

“The priest who suggested spreading pyre ash over the fields, was it the same priest who suggested sprinkling of the goat blood?”

“Well ... er ... yes.”

“And was this priest known to the villagers or to the other priests or to anyone else?”

“Strangest thing, now that you ask! This priest materialized out of nowhere and disappeared into nowhere. Nobody knows anything about him. Nobody has seen him before or after the ceremonies.”

“Did this priest participate in the fire sacrifice? Did you ever see him in any situation where his shadow could be cast on the ground?”

“He was never anywhere near any fire, as far as I can recall. And we only saw him at night – never during the day.”

“Describe him.”

“He was a small man, a little over five feet tall. His face was covered with so much beard that you could not tell what he really looked like.”

“Quite apart from his looks, was his voice that of a man or a woman?”

“I could not be sure – it could be either. We had no reason to think this was not a man.”

Now the younger brother asked a single question: “Was there any distinguishing feature about him – the way he moved, the way he gestured, anything at all?”

“Actually there was. Something rather remarkable. When he greeted you, he did not say anything but just gave a slight sideways tilt of his head.”

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When the Bagchi brothers arrived at their host’s house, the entire village was waiting to greet them. An elaborate afternoon tea for everyone was laid out in the courtyard in their honor. The brothers smiled and greeted everyone and mingled. After that, they said they would make a tour of the fields. When they returned, the exquisitely developing country evening was also spent in similar bonhomie.

While there was still daylight, the brothers had asked the escort to show them where a particular segment of the rice fields was. The escort was greatly surprised, but took them there. The brothers took in the view of the rice fields from that point and returned to the village.

A little after midnight the brothers prepared to go to the fields. Several people were ready to accompany them. But the elder Bagchi told them emphatically that this was no good. The brothers needed to be really and truly by themselves. No one should follow them or try to watch them. He then assured the Elder that there was no physical danger to them. The Elder reluctantly agreed. The brothers asked from their host two blankets and a box of matches.

“Surely you are not going to set fire to our haystacks?!” asked a surprised host.

“No.”

And the brothers were off. The game was afoot.



The brothers found that particular tract of the rice fields and settled down there. They stood back to back, with the elder brother scanning the northern sector while the younger brother scanned the southern. From a distance they looked like two little boys, which is what they were, alone in an open field – perhaps vulnerable to some danger. Where is their mother to look after them, an observer might have puzzled.

About an hour passed and nothing happened. No haystacks stirred. The two brothers turned towards each other to take stock of the situation. Right then they saw: the straw-man had suddenly materialized just about ten feet from them.

The brothers did not flinch. Rather they turned to face the object squarely. They joined their palms in greeting. In return the straw-man gave a slight tilt of head sideways. At this time a gust of wind removed the straw dangling over the face – and they saw the face. It was a real face – not a straw one. It was a young woman with large and sad eyes.

Now the younger brother looked deep into her eyes and spoke in calm and measured voice, with great sympathy: “Mataji, Motherly Lady of mine, I am so sorry but your children died shortly after you. The villagers tried their best to save them but did not succeed. You will not find them here no matter how long you stay here. Please go now and go in peace.”

The brothers thought they saw tears rolling down from the large eyes. The figure now extended the straw arms and with their straw extremities, touched the cheeks of the two brothers. The elder brother took out the match box and lit a match stick. He then raised it and held it in front of her as if to await permission. The straw-woman nodded ascent. The match was applied.

The brothers stood back and watched such spectacular colors of fire as they had never seen before – not in the rainbow, not on land, sea or sky. It was quickly over. There was not a speck of ash on the ground.

The brothers returned to the village and slept soundly until eight o’clock in the morning. They awoke to two steaming glasses of milked tea and to the entire village waiting in the courtyard.

The elder brother then said: “The straw-man has gone for good. You have nothing more to worry about.”

A villager asked how he knew this. The brother said: “We saw him walk to

the river and then straight into the water until he drowned.”

“What caused him to do that?” asked the same villager.

“We lit a bunch of straw and held this up to him, indicating that we would set him afire. He then started backing off and went into the river.”

The villagers started murmuring among themselves: How simple! How clever! Why didn’t we think to do this? Etc.

“And what about the murder?” asked another villager. The elder brother said: “That is nothing whatsoever to do with the straw-man. It is an internal village matter. PSI Lahan will find the killer.”

Now the villagers were amazed to hear their wise Elder, usually the answerer of questions, ask the two little boys a question in humble curiosity: “What was this about?”

“We think this was the result of the great torment of the soil.”

Later that Sunday many from the village escorted the Bagchi brothers to the river bank. Even the Elder came. Long goodbyes were said and the brothers were entreated to come visit again. As the brothers were about to get into the dinghy, they saw the Elder standing at a discreet distance. They walked up to him to say goodbye. The Elder now asked them in a low voice: “May I assume the real story will never come out?”

The Bagchi brothers were startled. But they quickly gained composure and the elder brother said: “Not from us it won’t.” Then he paused a few seconds and continued: “Elder, you have figured everything out. There was never any need to bring us, was there?”

The Elder smiled: “It is better this way. The problem is gone. The villagers will not have to relive the tragedy and revive their feelings of deep guilt. And our children were inspired by your example. That is no small gain for us village people.”

Suddenly the brothers understood what a sage this simple-looking man was. Instead of saying goodbye, they now bent down and touched his feet. He joined his palms in blessing.

The following week the murderer was caught and he confessed. The brash young man had been liaising with his wife for quite some time. When he saw one night the young man set out to slay the straw-man, he saw the opportunity and took his revenge. The entire village turned up in the court to testify in the killer’s behalf and he got away with a five-year sentence.



The Bagchi brothers were alone in their room. This was a time for a private review of the situation between just the two of them. No one could be privy to this. This is the only time the brothers expressed any weaknesses, fears, self-doubts and such other sentiments that no one associated with them. The younger brother asked:

“Dada, this is one affair we will never understand?”

“This is one affair we will never understand.”

“But somehow it was also a very moving affair?”

“Somehow.”

THE STATUARY FROM THE STONE QUARRY



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প্রস্তরখনির
মূর্তিখানি



All the four members of the Bagchi family were excited – each in his or her own way – about the two-week roadtrip to the Lushai Hills area. Sayan and Deep had been there before. But their experience during the Lunglei Diwali left a deep impression on each, and they each longed to go back to these places. Moreover, the prospect of a roadtrip with their parents also was most attractive.

The trip actually was suggested by Mrs. Bagchi's elder brother, Goutam Bose, IPS. He was well familiar with the haunting, mountainous beauty of the Lushai Hills, and wanted his sister's family to see these places. As his guest – in a manner of speaking.

The IPS meant that Bose had passed the prestigious Indian Police Service Examination, and joined the police force already as a high level officer. He in fact rose quite rapidly from there, and had just become the Deputy Inspector General of Assam Police, headquartered in Shillong. This was the highest position attainable by an Indian in British India, and carried considerable power and authority. The highest position, that of the IG, was held by an Englishman. Under him came the Assam Police as well as the formidable military police force Assam Rifles. The Assam Police was headed by DIG Bose and the Assam Rifles was headed by one Col. Ronojoy Chatterjee. By happenstance, Bose and Chatterjee were friends from the college days. The young Bagchis had heard much about Chatterjee from their uncle (all good). The colonel in turn was himself something of an adventurer and enjoyed hearing about the exploits of the young nephews from their uncle.

The upshot of all this is that the uncle had told the boys that the colonel might be in the Lushai Hills area, and if so, would arrange to meet the family there. The brothers anticipated this meeting with great pleasure, for they had already had an image of this man as a great hero.

About a week before the trip was to begin, the Officer-in-Charge of the Silchar Police came to the Bagchi home to pay a visit. Mr. Bagchi had known him only slightly, and was surprised to see him come to his home. The OC got right to the point: "Sir, I am here about your roadtrip to the Lushai Hills. Perhaps you would be kind enough to go over a few details with me."

To make a long story short, he insisted that the Bagchis travel in an unmarked police jeep with a plain-clothes Government driver, and stay at Government circuit houses everywhere. He explained that this was no special favor, but that regulations provided that close members of the DIG's family be escorted in this particular area which was highly sensitive – both politically and militarily. The brewing Second World War made this all the more imperative.

Mr. Bagchi reluctantly accepted, but insisted on paying all the expenses to the Government. The OC smiled and said: "That has already been taken care of by the DIG. Enjoy your trip. Go wherever you like, whenever you like. Anything at all you need, just ask your driver. He will be with you the whole time, staying with you at the circuit houses."

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The Bagchi brothers were constantly mindful of another facet of this trip. Their uncle, Mama, of course knew of their reputation as a mystery-solving, adventure-loving duo. His response to this quality in his nephews was to try to create and place problems before them that he made very difficult for them to solve. But he secretly hoped they would solve them. So the brothers fully expected that Mama would pose some problem along the way. Their task would be to recognize it as such and unravel it. So basically the brothers were prepared for anything – from a simple prank to an elaborate and well-disguised “conspiracy.”

If the roadtrip ended without their recognizing the plot, they would have to admit defeat – to themselves, that is.

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The jeep came to their home promptly at the appointed hour. The driver, a stalwart bearded and turbaned Sikh, was most pleasant. He wore civilian clothes: trousers, a half-sleeved shirt and a cream-color turban. He introduced himself as Shardul Singh. "Please call me Shardul," he said. The Punjabi-speaking Sikh spoke nearly fluent Bengali, resorting to Hindi when some Bengali word or expression escaped him. He surely had to be a policeman or a soldier or a secret service agent – but nothing about him betrayed that fact. The Bagchi brothers noticed he carried a shoulder bag that seemed to have something heavy in it. Must be a revolver. Also, when they climbed into the

jeep, they saw a Sten Gun clamped to the back of the driver's seat. Otherwise the jeep was unmarked, and had most comfortable seats.

When the driver saw the party eyeing the weapon, he said with a smile: "Please have no concern. This is just a standard precaution. There will never be any need to use it."

After a very leisurely journey with tea breaks and leg-stretching breaks, they crossed into the Lushai Hills area in the early afternoon, and were presently in the little village of Vairengte. This is where they would stop for two nights. Vairengte was one of the World's most pristine and primitive jungles, and a stay here was a very rare experience. The circuit house – one of a network of Government guesthouses – was basic but comfortable and the staff there was most hospitable, waiting to attend to their every need and every wish. They served the afternoon tea as soon as the party arrived.

Over tea, Shardul Singh made a number of suggestions for sightseeing the next day, and the family decide to leave themselves entirely in his care. The Bagchi brothers became most at ease with Shardul-ji, as they started to call him.

After tea, they all went for a walk in the "town" which was just the main highway with shops and other assorted buildings clustered around it. The view of the mountains all around was breathtaking. Back at the circuit house, they had an early meal – simple but delicious – and called it a night. The plan was to start at 8 am the next morning, and head into the deep and dense and dark bamboo jungles of Vairengte.

Sayan and Deep were up and about by 5 am. The parents were still fast asleep. Sayan said: "Deep, let's enjoy this quiet morning with this gorgeous light breaking. Let's walk to the town. May be a tea-shack will be just opening up its doors. We will buy the first cups of morning tea and sit by the road and see how the morning grows."

As it happened, there was activity in one of the tea stalls. The shopkeeper had put a large aluminum tea kettle on open fire. He said: "Come back in a little bit, and I will have nice cups of tea ready."

So they proceeded to walk towards the south end of the town, past the point where the rows of buildings on the two sides of the street ended. The road opened up, with 360-degrees view of the mountains. Next to the road, and at a little lower level, ran a rustic country lane, parallel to the road. It was mostly hidden from view by shrubs, but an occasional clearing offered a glimpse of the mud lane. It seemed that this lane ran the entire length of the highway, connecting one village to the next. It accommodated foot traffic as well as bicycles and bullock carts.

When they returned, steaming cups of tea were ready. The brothers sat down and sipped the morning's first cup of tea with great relish. It was obvious to the shopkeeper that they were tourists, and he started a conversation in that vein. When he heard that the brothers would be traveling south the following day, he suddenly perked up. He asked, completely out of context: "Are you Buddhists?"

"No, we are Hindus. But we have great regard for Buddhism," replied Sayan.

The shopkeeper then said: "I am pleased to hear you say that. So I will let you in on a program that is being conducted with as little advertisement as possible. You are just in time to watch the Journey of Faith commence. If you time yourself to be in Kolasib about ten in the morning, you will witness a most auspicious event. "

"Please continue," said Deep.

"Now, this Journey of Faith concerns an old monk carrying a stone statue of the Buddha from the stone quarry in Kolasib, where the statue has been carved, to a monastery in Burma, just across the border from Champhai. This is the monk's last act of devotion to the Buddha before he dies.

"However, this plan was made about five years ago when the monk was still in very good health and had great physical strength. He could have hoisted that statue piggy-back with straps around his shoulders and paddings and carried it half a kilometer at a time. So, although very difficult, the task could be done in a few weeks' time. But it took all this time for the local artisans –

only two of them – to carve this statue out of a single block of stone. During this time the monk has fallen quite ill and is now near death. So there is no way that he could do it today. Yet he is resolved to fulfil his commitment to the Buddha.”

“He would not agree to have it trucked? Or accept help from others in carrying it?” asked Deep.

“No. And he is most adamant on this point. He plans to simply drag the statue, resting on the ground on its heels, a few inches at a time. So, an entire day’s labor would probably cover about half a kilometer, if that. If the monk lives to finish his project, it will take months or years. And the auspicious day for the installation of the statue in the temple is the Buddha Purnima – the Full Moon of the Buddha – which is just a week from now. Clearly this is not to be, but the effort that the monk is making is a most wonderful act of faith and devotion to witness. It is a blessing for any mortal being to witness this. The journey will commence from Kolasib tomorrow morning about ten. Just go to the south end of the town, and you will see a small crowd near on the foot trail paralleling the highway. Please be as unobtrusive as possible.”

Sayan and Deep thanked the shopkeeper profusely. Then they started to pay him for the tea but he said, smilingly: “On the house. You are my beginning customers of the day. Offering you the tea is my day’s good deed. This means I will have good business throughout the day.”

Back in the guesthouse, the brothers told the parents about the Journey and they were most eager to witness this event. The plan then had to be broached to Shardul Singh. As he listened his eyes widened in surprise and perhaps awe. But his response was: “No problem. We will make an early start and be in Kolasib in plenty of time for this event.”

The party then set out to enter the jungle. The jeep would carry them only so far. Then they would be on foot. It turned out to be an experience of a lifetime. When they returned in late afternoon, tea and refreshment were ready. They washed up and enjoyed the tea service. Afterwards, the parents went to rest and Sayan and Deep went for a stroll in the town. As they walked, Deep asked his elder brother: “Dada, I know we are all excited about this

unique event tomorrow. But have you considered if this is not the trickery Mama is up to?”

“I have and I am. But there seems to be too much here to pre-arrange. This would be a monumental task to rig up just to execute a prank upon us. But it may be that the Buddhist event is real and Mama hatched some plan around it. Remember the exact timing of our trip was set by him.”

“True. On the other hand, how could he know we would get up early and be at this particular teashop?”

“He could not possibly. Let’s see – we were awakened by the sound of roosters and when we came to the town that teashop was the only shop open ... Hmm ... Anyway, let’s just keep our wits about on this.”

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They arrived in Kolasib a little early and proceeded on to the end of the town, that is, the place where the dense pack of shops on the two sides of the street had thinned out. Indeed, they could see now that down from the raised highway, near the foot trail, a small crowd of about a dozen people had gathered. Clearly, this was not a public event. Probably only a handful of people, people in this village mostly, knew about it. The party proceeded most casually towards the crowd.

There, in the middle of the crowd, was laid out on the ground the gray stone statue of the Buddha, face up. The carving was quite exquisite, and the face characteristically serene. The artisans had clearly spent a great deal of effort in carving the clothing the Buddha. It had the real-life look of a loose-fitting attire. The hair was coiffed in the crown-like style characteristic of the Buddha images. The left hand was parallel to the body while the right palm was raised in blessing.

Next to the statue stood a diminutive, very frail Buddhist monk in bright orange monk’s attire. The lush green of the land, the drab grey of the statue and the bright orange of the monk’s clothes created a visual feast. There were two other monks – much younger – who presumably had come to see their

senior monk off on the final journey. Now they were performing some type of ceremony with flowers and burning incense.

After this ceremony ended, the two young monks touched the elder monk's feet, and the latter touched their heads in blessing. Then the gathered crowd did the same, and the Bagchis joined. Just as the Bagchis were wondering if a Sikh would do obeisance to a Buddhist monk, Shardul Singh did so. The old monk now took his chador and twisted it to fashion a thick rope. He slid this through the armpits of the statue and behind the shoulder. He tried the loose ends of this rope together to form a loop. He now started to pull on the loop while facing the statue. After great effort the statue slid a few inches, its weight being supported by its heels. Seeing this, a bystander suggested to put something like a plank of wood under the heels to reduce friction. The monk explained to him, in kind words, that he could not use any type of "assist". He had to do the task as it lay before him. He then slid the statue a few inches more. The Journey of Faith had begun.

The Bagchis watched this for a while. Then the crowd slowly dispersed, and the Bagchis were on their way to Aizawl. They would stay in Aizawl one night, go to Lunglei and then return for a longer stay in Aizawl. They figured that the Buddha Purnima would occur during their second stay in Aizawl. But of course in these few days, the monk would hardly clear the Kolasib area, let alone be in Champhai. In any event, a thought was taking shape in the minds of the Bagchi brothers: If Shardul-ji could use his official capacity to take them across to Burma, they wanted to be in that monastery for the Buddha Purnima. Who knows what might happen there! Could a miracle bring the statue there on time?

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The visit to Lunglei naturally was a memory-stirring one for the brothers. Sayan seemed a little absent-minded to Deep and the latter understood. He did not say or do anything to disconcert his brother. The parents enjoyed the visit, what with Shardul Singh being such a good and caring tour guide.

Sayan broached the subject of the visit to the monastery to Shardul-ji, explaining why they wanted to visit. There was not much to explain really,

but only to say that they wanted to see that place where the Buddha statue would have been installed if the Journey of Faith had succeeded.

Shardul Singh replied: “It may be possible. Let me make some inquiries. Normally, I would just show them my warrant card and drive on through the gatepost at the border. But with civilians along – especially civilians with no paperwork - it is a little more complicated. But I will try.”

“Thank you Shardul-ji. Let’s hope providence will favor us in this mission of faith. Boley so nihaal!”

This Punjabi expression, which for Sikhs means “He who says (the following) is blessed”, Sayan added for some reason. To this Shardul-ji immediately provided the standard Sikh rejoinder: “Sat Sri Akal.”

Throughout their stay in Lunglei, another thought kept popping up – for both Sayan and Deep. Where was Mama’s prank? Or did he decide not to do anything this time? The journey was more than half done.

Also, Col. Chatterjee never contacted them. They were looking forward to meeting him. He must be a busy man, and probably could not take the time off. They saw that Shardul-ji was stopping at the police station in each town along the way, perhaps to pick up messages from his office. So a couple of times the brothers asked him if there were any messages from Col. Chatterjee. There were not.

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They returned to Aizawl in the late afternoon of the day before Buddha Purnima. The statue would have to have been in the monastery by tomorrow morning at the latest. But alas! That was not to be.

As they were entering the town of Aizawl and passing the road junction where the branch road to Champhai veered off, something caught Deep’s eye. A little distance from the road, near the jungle’s edge, he spotted a splash of orange color over the jungle’s green. Some exotic animal? Or another monk? He said: “Shardul-ji, would you stop for a second here please?”

As the car pulled up Deep showed the place to others. Everyone now became curious. Shardul Singh said: “There is a place up ahead from where we can get a better view.”

And what a view it was! It was the monk from Kolasib. He had laid down the statue and was resting. There was no doubt about it. And at the rate the monk had made his progress, there could be little doubt that he would make it to the monastery in time.

But how was this possible? An intense discussion ensued as they drove on, with everyone trying to propose a theory. The theory Shardul-ji proposed seemed the most reasonable one. He said: “I don’t want to say the monk is making short work of his scared vow, but it may be that at night when no one is watching him, he hitches a little ride with the overnight lorry drivers. He only rides with them as much distance as is necessary in order to make it to Champhai just in time – and no sooner. It makes practical sense. May be the monk changed his mind about not accepting help. I don’t see anything wrong with this, and I mean no disrespect to him.”

After they checked into the guesthouse and had afternoon tea, Sayan and Deep took Shardul-ji for a little walk. There was much commiserating to be done. The brothers already had had their private discussion and had decided that Shardul-ji had to be taken into confidence.

Shardul Singh listened to the entire plan in silence. After dinner, the two brothers and Shardul-ji would leave. Shardul-ji would tell the parents that he was going to give the boys the most adventurous experience of seeing a pristine jungle by night, hear the night sounds, smell the night smells, sense the dangers stalking. But it would be perfectly safe, Shardul-ji would tell the parents. Then the three of them would drive to a place on the Aizawl-Champhai road from where they could see the monk pass – whether in a lorry or on foot or any other way. They would stay as long as needed to watch the passage of the monk. Then, if there was time, they would come back to the guesthouse, freshen up and have breakfast, and then leave for the monastery across the border.

This was too much for Shardul Singh to absorb. He was being asked to help the boys do things behind their parents' back. That was an absolute no-no for him. At length he formulated his position. He pretended he had not heard anything the brothers just proposed, and said instead: "I would like to give you young gentlemen a feel of the jungle by night. It is quite a memorable experience. And it is quite safe to do. I will ask your parents about this. If they give their permission, we will set out right after dinner."

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The three of them stationed themselves around the large, gnarly trunk of an ancient tree. The tree was between the highway and the foot trail. From one side of it Sayan kept an eye on the foot trail. From the other side Deep looked upon the highway. Shardul Singh kept scanning his eyes three hundred and sixty degrees in case the brothers missed something. If the monk would be going to Champhai tonight, they would surely see him. The three of them talked in a low voice about random things, just to make sure no one fell asleep.

As the night progressed, the jungle truly took on a hauntingly enchanted aspect. It seemed that a new night smell arose. Night sounds floated over the quietness of this remote area where there were no manmade sounds at this hour. Occasionally a truck went by, and then everything was quiet again. From here it was possible to see inside the cab of the trucks. If the monk was seated there, they would see him.

Shortly after one am, as the spirit was sagging a little, they saw the headlights of a lorry approaching from the Aizawl direction. Deep and Shardul Singh fixed their eyes on it. By previous agreement, Sayan would not do that but keep his eyes and his attention fully fixed on the foot trail.

As the sound of the lorry grew and its light brightened, suddenly Sayan sensed some faint movement on the foot trail – approaching this way. Then all of a sudden, as if revealed by a lightning flash, the monk and the statue passed in front of him and vanished in the distance. They were moving at a fantastic speed! Sayan saw very distinctly what he saw, but he could not believe what he saw. He began to have self-doubt. And now there was no

opportunity for Shardul-ji and Deep to see it. The vigil was over. The monk had passed. But what exactly happened?

The lorry had come and gone. No one in it but the driver. Now Sayan told the other two exactly what he saw. He saw their eyes bulge out of the sockets. That meant they believed Sayan saw what he said he saw, but found the scene quite incredible.

At length Shardul-ji spoke: "It is most interesting that there are three of us, but only one eyewitness to this. If there were two eye witnesses, we could tell the story to others with some credibility. But with one eye witness, it is not a tellable story even if it is true. It is a miracle shown only to one person."

They came back to the guesthouse and slept the rest of the night. The following morning the parents said they would go to the town and do some shopping, leaving the boys with the vehicle and the driver. The jeep arrived at the border post about ten in the morning. Shardul Singh asked the boys for their full names and ages, and then asked them to wait in the jeep while he went inside the office to see if a brief visit to Burma could be arranged.

Sayan and Deep could see the inside of the office through a large glass window. They observed something most odd. "Did you see that?" he asked Deep.

"Yes," replied Deep. "What does it mean, Dada?"

"I am not sure, Deep."

A little later Shardul-ji came out with a smile on his face. "We can go," he announced proudly. The guard at the gatepost raised the bar and the jeep drove into Burma.

Shortly after crossing the border, they saw the monastery, its sparkling white playing against the lush green landscape of the Champhai Valley area. But when they walked into the monastery compound, a sad sight awaited them. A group of mourning monks were standing round the dead body of the old monk. Buddhist prayers were being chanted in a plaintive and sonorous note. The three comers simply stood there, heads bowed in solemn respect.

When the ceremony was over, they asked a young monk what was going on. The young monk said most excitedly: “This dead monk, he is the holiest of holy men. He carried a heavy stone statue from the quarry in Kolasib to here entirely on his own. It must have taken him many months, if not a year. But he arrived here in the nick of time for the statue to be installed under the auspicious Buddha’s Moon. No sooner did he deliver the statue to us than he collapsed.”

They went round to the temple and saw the grey statue installed on a pedestal, with votive offering of flowers and garlands adorning it. A monk there said that the installation ceremony would take place in the evening, under the full moon. The face of the statue looked even more serene in this setting. And the raised hand seemed to bless directly whoever was wishing the blessing.

Sayan stood there a long time looking at the statue most fixedly, while the other two went about seeing the rest of the monastery.

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“Dada, we will never know what happened there in jungle that night. May be we should not try to analyze this. Just consider it a gift of faith to one that is of faith. But what is certain is that the monk affair is not Mama’s prank.”

“That’s true, Deep. But have you figured out what the prank is?”

“Yes. But how do you handle it”?

“Let’s wait till the roadtrip is all over.”

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They arrived home in Silchar in the noon. The parents invited Shardul Singh to stay for lunch, then rest a while and then leave. But he politely declined, saying he had to go back to his office and report in. He promised to visit again. Everyone thanked him effusively and came out to the jeep to see him off.

As Shardul Singh was about to put the jeep in gear, Sayan asked: “Is the beard real, Col. Chatterjee?”

The driver broke out in laughter. “It is real – I grew it just for this little subterfuge. But what gave me away?”

“Well,” said Deep, “you did very well in every way. Perfect, I would say. You even provided the Sikh rejoinder ‘Sat Sri Akal’ without a moment’s hesitation. What gave you away was not your fault. At the Burma border when you left us in the jeep and went inside the office, we could see you through a window. We saw you show the desk officer there your warrant card and say something to him. The officer suddenly sprang to his feet and saluted. Then he kept standing stiffly at attention the whole time. Then we saw you pointing to your beard and the turban. Clearly, you were explaining your disguise.”

“Then it *is* my fault. I should have parked the jeep more carefully,” smiled Col. Chatterjee. “Well, young men, I am very glad that you have seen through the prank. Otherwise both Goutam and I would be disappointed – even in our victory.”

Col. Chatterjee promised to come to lunch the next day as his real self, before he left for Shillong. The brothers looked forward to it, for they had come to like the man a lot. They also wanted to talk to him a little more about that night on the road to Champhai. Somehow that matter needed some kind of closure.

Sayan wanted to tame a little the sight he saw, so that it would not haunt him for the rest of his life. Rather, he wanted it to become in his mind a wealth of pure bliss. For there in that portentous jungle, amid the growing night resonances, the flashed image of a drab-grey stone sculpture carrying the orange-clad monk on its shoulder and walking at break-neck speed could be nothing but that.

*This story is based on Buddhist lore.



THE LIGHT HERDER OF SHAMA-I-MAZAR

শামা-ই-মাজারের আলোকরাখাল



Strictly speaking, this is not a Bagchi Brothers story, for the brothers were not present during the 'main event' nor did they ever know what transpired there. On the other hand Sayan and Deep did set things in motion – in their own particular way – and in that sense it is their story. At the time Sayan was probably about fourteen and so Deep about twelve. But let us start with the principal, Muneer Ali, the young professor of Chemistry at the G. C. College in Silchar.

Muneer was born and brought up in Silchar. He studied there all the way to his Bachelor's Degree, and then went to Calcutta to receive his Master's Degree. It was here that he met Abeer Khatoun and fell in love. Abeer gave up her cherished metropolitan lifestyle and came to live in Silchar which, without meaning any derogation, could be described as a provincial small-town then. Here Muneer found the position at the G. C. College and Abeer was welcomed as a teacher of English at the Government Girls' High School. So the life of the newlyweds was full in every respect. If people did not use the term 'ideal couple' that was only because they did not want to attract any ill omen with too much talk of perfection.

The Alis lived in a small but elegant home near GandhiBagh, the town's central park and festival ground. Muneer's family was distantly related to the Bagchi family by an inter-religion marriage, and so there was social visiting back and forth between the two households. And that had led to the special relationship between the brothers and Muneer. He became something of a science advisor to the adventuring brothers. There had been times when – on a Saturday or a Sunday – Muneer took the brothers to his college laboratory and the three performed some experiments together.

In time Sayan and Deep came to like the man well, and saw him as an adult friend. This tie became even stronger as the brothers learned from Muneer's mother who came visiting from Sylhet where she now lived, that as a young boy, Muneer was much like the brothers in his love for adventuresome exploits. A few stories were also around, including one about when Muneer briefly became an apprentice of an itinerant Moslem holy man of mysterious persona.

Muneer liked having become something of a role model for the brothers. Whenever he would meet them, he would invariably greet them with the ebullient greeting: "Ah Holmes and Watson, I see!" Abeer also took a great fancy to the boys. This meant that sometimes the Alis would invite just Sayan and Deep to come spend a leisurely day with them, in addition to the occasional socializing between the two families. To Sayan and Deep, the couple presented a most wonderful picture of marriage: friendship, love, companionship, mutual enrichment. In short, pure bliss.

But an omen did befall that home, one of the darkest kind. Abeer was stricken with a disease that her doctor at first did not take seriously. When there was no improvement in her condition for days, another doctor was called in. He misdiagnosed the disease which now continued to worsen. When the brothers heard about Abeer's illness at this stage for the first time, they immediately asked Mr. Bagchi to step in. Mr. Bagchi then used his considerable influence to promptly bring in none other than Dr. B. Bhattacharya, known as the Dhanvantari of Silchar – the miracle man who could cure all maladies. The great doctor took one look and said it was typhoid. But it was also very advanced. The patient hardly had any strength left to undergo a course of treatment with the then newly available Chloromycetin. Dr. Bhatt prescribed this medication anyway but it turned to be not immediately available in Silchar. By the time a supply was found in the shortest possible time – thanks again to Mr. Bagchi – it was too late.

The loss of Abeer completely devastated Muneer. It was as though the only light had gone out of his life and his home and his heart. and with it was gone his will to live. Beyond this, the manner in which she died also left Muneer full of strong emotions, people sensed. Grief and frustration and guilt combined to make him shut himself off from everything except his teaching duties which he discharged most faithfully. People said: Look, this fine man would never short-change his students, not in any circumstances.

The only other activity Muneer undertook every day with clockwork regularity was to visit his wife's grave in the evening. He would kneel down near the grave and stay that way for long periods of time. People passing by

would see this poignant sight from a distance but would never disturb him. This was probably the only thread that connected Muneer to reality.

Many tried to reach Muneer in many ways and with much care and patience, but all to no avail. The Alis had a live-in housemaid, an elderly lady who had no other relatives. She had become practically a third member of the Ali family. Relatives, friends and neighbors started commiserating with her to find out what was going on and what could be done. She would always report that Muneer would not eat his meals properly nor take care of himself otherwise. Indeed, he started to look emaciated. This could not go on very long without his health collapsing.

The person who everyone thought would be the most logical to make Muneer return among the living was Reshmi, the next door neighbor of the Alis, who had become the greatest of friends with Abeer. The two young women became nearly inseparable. There was constant visiting back and forth, as though the two houses were one – without any kind of barrier. Reshmi was a vocal music teacher at the Sangeet Vidyalaya while Abeer had a great singing voice. So that was another common interest. The two would – on weekend and holiday evenings especially – get together and sing in unison at impromptu gatherings in the Ali livingroom. The neighbors loved such sessions and would not miss a chance to lose themselves in the mellifluous and mood-lifting Tagore songs.

There was one song in particular that the two always withheld from public. It purports to be a lovesong to be sung by one person to his or her paramour in romantic privacy. But in this case Abeer and Reshmi would jointly sing it to Muneer, who would be beside himself with pure joy and yet showing subtle signs of awkwardness. His wife and her friend professing deep love to him at the same time! For this is how the song went:

You are all that my heart desires

Without you, I have no one else, nothing else in this world...

Watching Muneer's discomfort, the two young women would be amused in a slightly mischievous way. It was every bit like Reshmi was a prankster

sister-in-law to Muneer. Such was the easy happiness that dwelled in that house.

Reshmi and the housemaid constantly tried to be on top of the situation, but had no luck in reaching Muneer at any level. He would listen to them courteously, but silently. He could not be engaged in any conversation on any subject. Someone remarked that Muneer had become a genial zombie. And of course music had no room in that once musical house anymore.



Naturally, the Bagchi brothers were fully informed on the situation and stayed on top of it, especially through their contact with Reshmi. The brothers discussed between themselves what, if anything, *they* could do. Muneer was particularly receptive to the brothers when they visited him and would soften to the point of asking the maid to make tea. He would even have a cup himself with the visitors. But the conversation did not go much beyond school and weather. The young brothers did not know how to broach 'the subject', and went away feeling quite helpless. In the end they concluded that this problem was not up their alley. Here was no haunted house mystery to solve or a peddler's scam to expose. It was an adult job, somewhat beyond their repertoire of problem-solving art. But they were not happy about absolving themselves of responsibility with this logical-sounding conclusion. So the matter kept nagging at them.

But the world moves on. Nearly a year passed since Abeer's death. There was no change in Muneer's situation. It was a miracle that he had not fallen terminally ill from neglect of his own health and welfare. Around about this time there came visiting the Bagchi home a family from Calcutta. The man, Dr. Sushanta Bagchi, was Mr. Bagchi's first cousin. He worked as a psychiatrist at the General Hospital and taught psychology at the Medical School. On the very next day after the visitors arrived, while there was great merrymaking going on between the two families, Sayan said to Deep: "Here is our god-sent opportunity to do something about Uncle Muneer!"

The visiting family had returned from a day of sightseeing and had just finished having an afternoon cup of tea. It was about four pm. Sayan and Deep invited Dr. Bagchi to come for a walk by the river. Fortunately, no one else offered to come along. The three chitchatted about life in Calcutta as they approached the river. Then the brothers tried to steer the conversation towards psychology. Dr. Bagchi was cognizant of the brothers' extracurricular activities. Now that he saw that the boys were having difficulty coming to some point, he asked with a broad smile: "But tell me, boys, what's really on your minds? Why this interest in this dry subject of psychology?"

Sayan now embarked upon a concise but complete description of Muneer Ali's malady. He also gave a good account of the happy family life that preceded this. When he finished, Dr. Bagchi asked a few questions. They had arrived at the river. Dr. Bagchi looked around and saw a round concrete platform circling the base of a large tree. He invited all to sit down. Then he began to speak.

"People deal with grief of loss in different ways. What you describe is not unknown in psychology. If you like, I can speak to this gentleman. But frankly, I don't think that will do any good. He is an intellectual and may very well resent any implications that he needs a head doctor. I believe the solution is more up your alley than mine.

"Muneer Ali has completely shut off that part of him that deals with emotions, feelings and self-awareness. Lecturing him on this will not draw him out. What is necessary is to get him interested in something, anything at all. If you can get him hooked on something without him ever realizing that you are tricking him, then that has the best chance to work. As soon as he takes a genuine interest in something, he will slowly come out of his shell. One trigger, and his mind will do the rest. So rather than us trying to heal his mind, we should let his mind heal him. You boys follow?"

"Very clearly," said Sayan. "Just one question. Can we make up something to get him interested? What I mean is this. Suppose we make up some story that he latches on to, and then we string him along. But then he finds out the story is not true."

"That's perfectly all right. The story is not important. The fact that you have engaged him is. We are not talking about you lying, but exercising some imagination."

A little later, back at home, the brothers commiserated. It was decided that there was no time to lose. Moreover, this was a Saturday and the brothers had time on their hands. After the plan was hatched, they set out towards Muneer Ali's home. They were sure he would be home, because he did not go anywhere except to the college during the day and to the grave in the evening.

Indeed he was home, and answered the door himself. When he saw the brothers, he gave a courteous nod. But there was no warmth in it. His ebullient greeting for the brothers of the earlier days was gone these days. Deep quickly said: "Uncle Muneer, we came to see the Time-traveling Pir in GandhiBagh, and thought we would stop by to say hello to you."

They saw a spark in Muneer's eyes they had not seen in a year. Before he could check himself, Muneer exclaimed: "The Time-traveling Pir?!"

Sayan now played his part to further implant the story about a Moslem holy man, a Pir, that they had dreamed up. "This is a mysterious itinerant Pir who stopped in Silchar for a couple of days. He holds vigil in the gazebo in GandhiBagh. This is his last day. Tomorrow he is heading for the North Cachar Hills. We were able to catch him in the nick of time. He reportedly leaves after dusk and goes to sleep in the Itkhola masjid."

"Go on," said Muneer.

Thus encouraged, Deep continued. "He tells historical stories from places he has visited. Only, the history is not of the past but that of the future. We heard a couple of stories and they really sound like those of H. G. Wells. And yet the Pir does not seem like a person who would have read English science fiction.

"Well, at any rate, anyone can make up stories set in future. There is no way to verify them. But here is the thing. The Time-traveling Pir apparently can

read what is in your mind and say something that will tell you that he actually can do so. This is why we went."

"And?"

Sayan took over. "We're both solidly convinced that he can see into your mind. Anyway, Uncle Muneer, we best be off. We have out-of-town visitors staying at our home."

Without any further words exchanged, the brothers withdrew and walked in the direction of their home. A while later they doubled back and started to walk towards GandhiBagh. Daylight had failed and dusk was setting in. A little distance away from the gazebo there was some shrubbery. The brothers settled down behind these, squatting as comfortably as they could. The gazebo was empty and so was the park. There was no one in sight. The brothers continued looking in the direction Muneer was likely to come from, if he would come at all.

They did not have to wait long. They saw the familiar silhouette approaching the gazebo. Deep whispered: "He would be greatly disappointed to see the gazebo empty."

"But he will figure he is too late. The idea will remain alive with him even if he does not see the Pir."

Muneer had gained the gazebo. As he came close, the brothers waited to see him turn back in disappointment. But that did not happen. Instead, Muneer took off his sandals and stepped up to the paved floor of the gazebo. He did a respectful salaam, seemingly to someone invisible sitting in the center of the gazebo. Then Muneer sat down, cross-legged, at the edge of the platform, facing the center. Then ensued an indistinct conversation. The brothers could only hear the faintest of sounds from here. It was not possible to say how many voices were there or what was being said. Astounded, all the brothers could do was to look at each other. They did not want to speak for fear of being found out.

This went on for nearly half an hour. Then Muneer did another long salaam and started back. Alarming, he was taking another exit gate from the park than the one he came through. This would bring him right next to the shrubbery where the brothers were hiding. But fortunately darkness had thickened. The brothers squatted as low as they could and held their breath as Muneer was passing by. They heard him talking to himself. All they could make out was that he was saying "... shama mazar ... shama mazar ...". But they knew no such words.

After Muneer was out of earshot, a gaping Deep spoke in a whisper, his eyes nearly bulging out: "Dada, it seems we made up a whole Time-traveling Pir!"

"Yes, the three of us did," replied Sayan.

The Bagchi brothers decided to keep this incident to themselves, telling not even Dr. Bagchi.



After the Bagchi brothers left, Muneer went back to his shell, sitting morosely in an armchair in his back porch. But his thoughts kept coming back to the Pir. These phrases were floating through his mindscape: Time-traveling Pir, North Cachar Hills, history is not of past but that of future, he can read what's on your mind.... Then the visions of North Cachar Hills kept playing over his mind's movie screen – the quaint mountain railroad, the picturesque stations with catchy names like Hilara, Bihara, Jatinga, ... Muneer was familiar with the area and could now see a Pir floating over them, over the streams and the hills and the green valleys – time-traveling. Muneer was intensely excited. He sprang to his feet, took a shawl and wrapped it around himself and walked out in his household sandals he was wearing. He hoped it was not too late to catch a glimpse of the Time-traveling Pir.

All the way during his short walk to the park and the gazebo, Muneer's mind was racing. He could not control it anymore. When he gained the gazebo and

saw the Pir sitting in the middle, he finally gained his composure. In fact the sight of the Pir brought to him a great tranquility.

Muneer did a respectful salaam to the Pir, saying: "Khuda ki meherbani that I have this good fortune to have a glimpse of you, O Great Holy Man. May I sit down with you a minute?"

The Pir had his eyes closed. Without opening them, he nodded assent. Muneer sat down. He remained silent, waiting for the Pir to permit him to speak. Instead, the Pir said: "My son, this dead soul of yours needs to be brought back to life. You need to visit Shama-i-Mazar."

There was a long silence. Then Muneer said: "Please tell me what Shama-i-Mazar is and where it is and I will go visit it, O Holy Man."

"No, I cannot tell what it is nor where it is. This is simply because it is different for different people. What it is for you only you will know. But come to the station tomorrow morning and we will together take the North Cachar Mountain Train to where you need to go."

With that the Pir fell silent. Muneer sat for a long while and then got up. He thought for a while and decided he needed to visit his fellow chemistry professor Shobhan Mukherjee at his home. He would visit the grave first and then go to the Mukherjee home. He started thus for the southward gate of the park. While he was walking, the name Shama-i-Mazar kept playing in his mind like a haunting refrain. He had studied Urdu as a child and knew what that expression meant. He kept muttering to himself: Shama-i-Mazar, Shama-i-Mazar ...

Shobhan Mukherjee readily agreed to stand in for him on Monday and teach his class. Muneer told him that his next class was on Wednesday, and by then he will be back from his trip. Mukherjee expressed concern and asked if anything was amiss and if Muneer needed any help. But Muneer evaded all questions. Nor did he tell Mukherjee where he was going.



Sunday afternoon the Bagchi brothers started to get fidgety. What happened? Did anything actually happen? Did things get set in motion? Eventually, each admitted to the other that he was curious to find out.

"But we were at Uncle Muneer's house only yesterday! If we go there again, he will suspect we are up to something. Then the whole idea will fail. May be we should give it some time. With the school on, we can't go there before next Saturday at the earliest. But there is something we could do right away," said Deep.

"I know. We can find out what Shama-i-Mazar means," replied Sayan.

"Exactly. I think there is some clue in there. But those words sound like high Hindi or Urdu – words that you are most likely to find in Hindi film songs. If not, then we have to find someone who knows Urdu."

"Let's go talk to our friend the Hindi film buff first."

That friend was just their neighbor Arun next door – a veritable Hindi film encyclopedia. When he heard what the brothers wanted and heard the sound Shama-i-Mazar repeated a number of time, he said with feigned pomposity: "You have come to the right source. Sit down and I will explain. But I don't think what you have heard is Shama-i-Mazar. It is more likely Shama-i-Mazar, because shama and mazar are two words and the 'i' in the middle means 'of'. Now Shama means a lamp and Mazar means a tomb or a grave. So Shama-i-Mazar is Lamp on the Tomb. The lamp in this case is the kind of votive evening lamp Ma lights under the Tulsi plant in the courtyard, a clay lamp with a wick and some oil in it. You boys are on a new caper?!"

The brothers thanked Arun profusely and returned home. Now they knew what Shama-i-Mazar was.

On Thursday morning the houseguests left. The Bagchi family went to the railroad station to see them off. At one point Dr. Bagchi pulled the brothers aside, winked and said; "Drop me a postcard."

The brothers nodded simultaneously.



About five am Sunday morning Muneer arrived at the railroad station and found the Pir standing near the ticket counter. The latter told Muneer to buy a ticket for the North Cachar Hills mountain railway, for the station Milongdisa. Muneer asked if he could buy a ticket for the Pir as well, but the latter showed him he already had his ticket. After Muneer got his own ticket, the Pir said: "I will be getting off at Harangajao, the station just before Milongdisa. I will then tell you where to go from Milongdisa."

The Pir never spoke again throughout the journey, refusing even to accept the offer of tea and snacks. He simply wrapped himself in a blanket and kept dozing off. From Badarpur Junction the train started its climb up the rugged mountainous terrain. A few minutes before they were to arrive in Harangajao, the Pir stirred. Then he said: "Get off at Milondisa and ask for the foot trail to the hills. There is only one trail. Cross two hills. When you are coming down the slope of the second hill, about halfway down, another trail veers off to the right. Take that until you reach the hidden valley."

"Shama-i-Mazar?" asked Muneer, bursting with curiosity.

"*Your* Shama-i-Mazar," replied the Pir. "After you return home from here, you will remember nothing about this trip. Not even the name Shama-i-Mazar. And if ever in your life you hear that name again, you will know within your heart that you are in a good place. Then take a look around you and you will know what step to take to make yourself whole again."

That was the last time the Pir spoke. He got off without even saying goodbye.

Within a short time the train pulled into Milongdisa and Muneer got off. He only had a small cloth bag hanging from his shoulder. When he asked the ticket collector at the station exit gate about the trail, the man pointed to it – clearly visible in the distance. But then he asked: "Where are going that at this time of day? That trail takes you nowhere!" It was nearly five pm. Muneer quickly replied: "I was thinking about going on a nature hike early tomorrow morning."

Muneer started on his trek. He took out the shawl he had in his bag and wrapped himself tightly against the evening chill. The trail was distinct and easy to walk on. In the end he found the secondary trail just as the Pir described. But now it was already dusk, and getting darker fast. Muneer was very tired. His once robust physique had become just a shadow of its former self, what with a year of malnourishment and neglect.

At one point the secondary trail ended, leaving no indications as to how to proceed now. Muneer looked around him and considered his situation. Visibility now was quite low. He could see the open range of hills in the distance. Close by, a semicircular clump of trees obstructed his view. His options were now to continue uncertainly over the hill or enter the clump of trees. He did the latter.

But as he pushed his way through the shrubbery among the tree trunks and cleared the first several rows of trees, suddenly in front of of – and down below – there opened up an expansive valley, its lush verdure apparent even in this dim light. On it and spread over it was grazing a herd of cows. The view had a calming and serene quality to it.

It was a depression valley surrounded by hills, like a bowl. But at the far end there was a gap in the hills and the sun's last red color was showing through it and spreading over it. To Muneer the entire scene seemed like a giant votive lamp, with the last rays of the sun making up the distinct flame. The mist filling the valley seemed like the oil in the lamp. So perhaps the sky was the grave, thought Muneer to himself.

Muneer descended down the slope until he was nearly to level of the valley and yet high enough to command the entire vista. There he found a thick tree

trunk and sat down with his back to it. He pulled in his shawl even tighter, and settled in. My Shama-i-Mazar, he told himself out loud with a sense of upliftment.

Strangely, the lack of light was no longer a problem. He could see the entire valley as though by starlight. The moon was not visible. The cows were moving only very slightly and only to move their mouths from one patch of grass to another. The ones on the foreground could be seen clearly but the ones further away seemed to slowly blend into a misty light which blended into the sky which blended into the stars.

Muneer lost all sense of time, of place, of himself. The vista was the only reality here. Everything else emptied out from his mind and his head. The valley was going through some type of transformation right before him that he could not quite comprehend until he heard the faintest of faint note of a flute. The cowherd's flute! It was calling the herd home. The cow-dust hour of poetry.

Slowly, the grazers all turned towards the far horizon – towards the flame. Then the whole herd started moving away from Muneer and seemingly towards where 'home' was. Now Muneer instinctively focused his eyes on the place where the flame of the lamp was. As each cow approached that point, it grew in size and became translucent and then became light – all light. An entire herd of cows made of light was flowing into the sky. Then Muneer saw. One by one the cows became stars. Then the stars started grazing in the sky.

All this happened in the undulating lilt of the flute – that haunting call for all things to come home. Muneer heard the same flute deep within him as if it was calling him as well. He stood up and started walking in the same direction as the cows. But it no longer felt like physical walking. It was more that he was wafting over the valley as the sound of the flute became stronger in his ears. He could now tell the direction it was coming from. And then, in the distance, he saw the cowherd. The silhouette suggested a boy or a young woman intently playing on the flute, fully engrossed in it.

The flute impelled Muneer to follow the herd home. He continued to approach the gap in the hills. As he reached it, he heard the note of the flute

transform, very slowly. After a time the note was fully recognizable. It was a song that was very much his own, one that always made him happy all over – even if tinged with a bit of awkwardness. The only difference this time was that there was only one musician – playing for him in the romantic privacy of this vast valley and this wide sky.



It was early light when Muneer got to the Milongdisa station. There was nobody in sight except for the clerk at the ticket booth. Muneer bought his ticket. Then the clerk said: "The Down Train is not due for an hour yet. There a small shop on the platform where you can have your morning cup of tea."

Suddenly that little extra gesture on the part of the clerk filled Muneer with great joy. He sensed in it a human warmth and caring that he had long resisted. He thanked the man and entered the platform. He saw the shop down a ways along the platform. Even as the shopkeeper saw him approach, he poured a cup of tea. Again, Muneer was deeply touched by this spontaneity.

"Anything else you would like with you tea? Our palm cake slices are quite fresh and tasty," said the shopkeeper.

For the first time in a long time, Muneer felt hungry. He ordered two slices of palm cake. These were thick, semicircular slices cut from the barrel-shaped cake – a specialty at the railroad stations. Muneer savored them. He now felt the need for a little pointless conversation, something he had never had in a year. He said: "There's no Wheeler Bookstore in this station?"

The shopkeeper smiled. He said: "Babu, this is a very small station. This shop is all there is. And actually, people like it that way. No one here wants Milongdisa to grow into a bustling town."

"What is it like to live here?"

"It is difficult to say because we don't know what it is like to live anywhere else. But our life is peaceful. The place is surrounded by vast wildernesses which hold mystery, spirituality an energy. We feel we are a part of them. In fact, some feel that the wildernesses are alive."

The conversation continued warmly in this vein.



On Saturday afternoon the Bagchi brothers planned to go visit Reshmi and try to find out about Muneer. They knew Reshmi well and did not need a reason to visit her. But Deep had an idea. He said: "Why don't we go see Uncle Muneer directly, and say that we would like to go with him to visit the grave of Auntie Abeer? Then we can light a lamp on the tomb there."

The idea appealed to Sayan. But he said they should first check on the religious propriety of this with Auntie Kamala. Kamala was Arun's mother next door. She was a very devout woman, learned in things of this nature. The brothers found her in the kitchen and described what they wanted to do as she was cooking. "So Auntie, do you think it is all right for us Hindus to light a lamp on a Moslem grave?"

"It is more than all right. It is a most touching gesture. Never lose that quality which in you makes you want to do this," she replied. Then she said the brothers need not go shopping for clay lamps but that she had a supply that she would fix them up with. Thus fortified the brothers started on their way to Muneer's home. They would get there before dusk, before Muneer would start on his daily visit to the grave.

Unfortunately, they missed him by a couple of minutes. But Reshmi was standing in the porch of her house next door. After exchange of pleasantries, Reshmi suggested the brothers should go on and catch up with Muneer. But the boys did not exactly know how to go to the grave. "OK, I will come along," said Reshmi.

As they walked together, Reshmi said: "There has been a most wonderful development. Muneer went away somewhere, out of town I think, for a couple of days last weekend. No one knows where he went. When the maid asked, he said he truly could not remember. Anyway, ever since his return, he seems to be a changed man. Not so much in a visible way or a drastic way, but changed most definitely. If you greet him, he greets you back. If you converse with him, he converses. This is a good start, all of us neighbors think. But we are letting him come back to the world of living in his own pace and not rushing him. He is also eating normally now. Strangely, he asked his maid to lay in a supply of plum cakes and serve him in bias-cut semicircular slices, with tea."

Sayan and Deep looked at each other. Things did happen after that evening – real-life things! They asked Reshmi for more details and she told them what she knew about the changed Muneer. Presently, they arrived at the graveyard and found Muneer kneeling next to his wife's grave. As they approached him he turned, saw them and stood up: "Ah Holmes and Watson, I see! Hello Reshmi!" It was as though he was his old self.

Deep took the lead. He said: "Uncle Muneer, if it's OK with you we would like to light an evening lamp for Auntie Abeer."

Muneer seemed to be completely overwhelmed by that gesture. Tears appeared in the corner of his eyes. In a choked voice, he said: "I am most grateful to you."

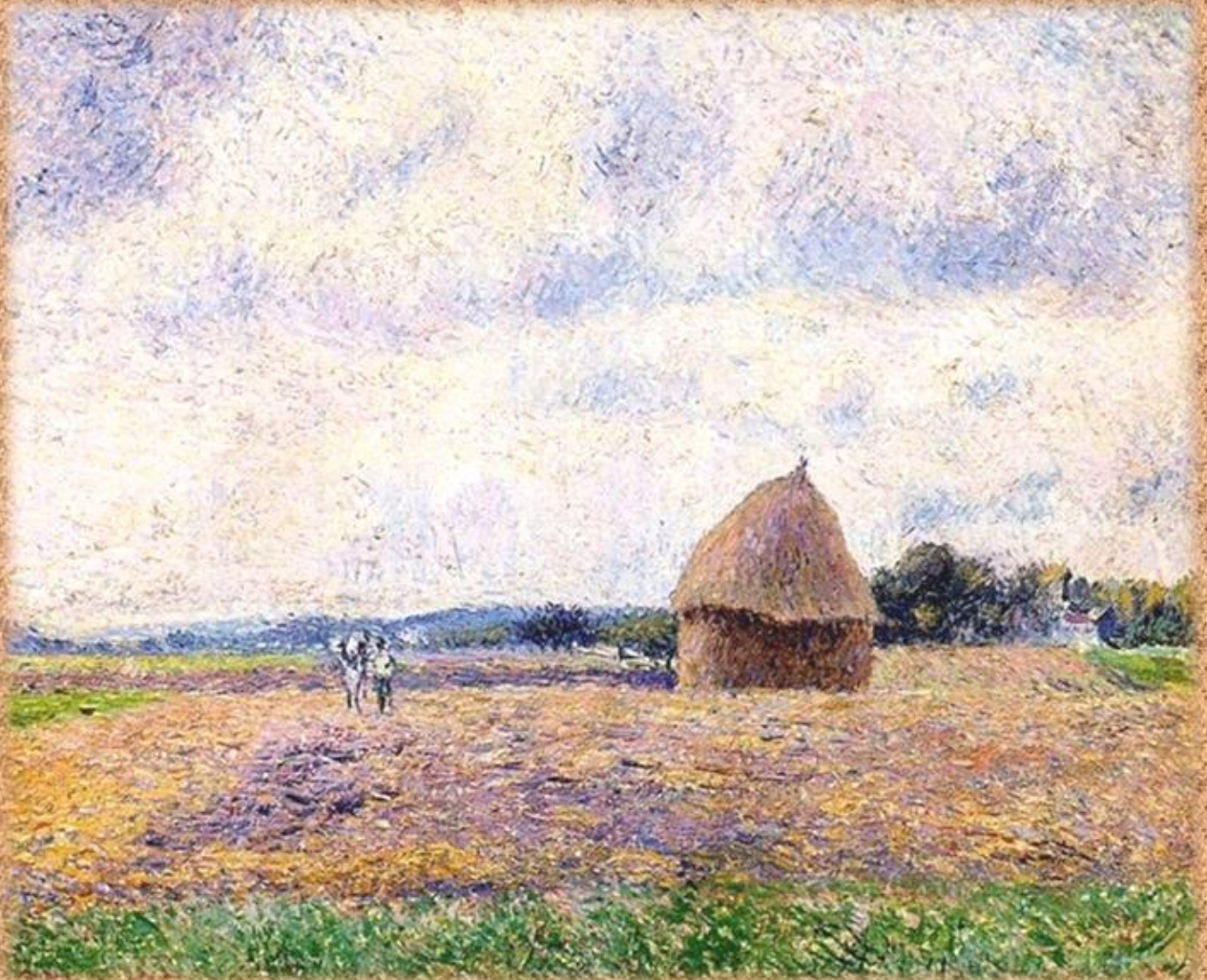
They put a wick in the clay lamp and then poured some oil. The lamp was placed on top of the headstone. Sayan struck a match and then handed the lighted match stick to Muneer. He knelt down and lit the lamp. They all knelt down.

When everyone recovered from the deep emotional experience, Deep gave Muneer the box containing a few extra lamps, wicks and a bottle of oil. He even put in the matchbox. "Here, light the lamp every evening. This supply will last you a long time. Then we will bring you another supply."

Muneer eagerly took the box in his two hands, in silence. That said all. Now Sayan said: "Uncle Muneer, Auntie Reshmi, we have another place to visit this evening and so we will take your leave."

Muneer nodded silently. He and Reshmi kept looking at the receding figures the boys. At that moment both Deep and Sayan turned instinctively to look at Muneer one more time. Muneer and Reshmi were standing side by side, close to each other, their wave-goodbye hands still raised. The lamp, burning bright in the gathering dark, was visible through the gap between the two of them. Deep pointed to the lamp and said: "The lamp on the tomb! In Urdu, Shama-i-Mazar."

THE LEAN-TO OF THE RAM AND THE EWE



Camille Pissarro: Haystack Eragny

মেডামেডির ঘর



If you have started reading this story without having read earlier about the Bagchi brothers of Silchar, let me give you a brief recap. These two adventure-loving daredevil boys were well-known for rising to the challenge of any mystery, any puzzle, anything vexing that was brought to their attention. Whether it was a haunted house or it was the weeping image of a goddess or it was a sadhu who spread holy ashes by a sweep of his empty hand, the brothers would get to the bottom of the business. Nobody in Silchar had any doubts that they would. Such was their reputation. Otherwise, however, they were perfectly normal boys. They were both good, but not exceptional, students at school. At home, they were the epitome of politeness and respectfulness to elders. Their hobbies at home were completely at odds with their adventuresome proclivities. The elder brother crocheted and made gifts of decorative tablecloths, stool covers, tea-cozies, handkerchiefs etc. to family and friends. The younger brother collected exotic plants – orchids, bonsais, Venus Flytraps and so on. He made starter plants and presented these to others.

The challenge on this occasion that I speak of was the sighting of mysterious lights in an abandoned house at the edge of Malugram. Where Malugram ends, the town of Silchar ends. Then the habitation gradually becomes sparse, the dense row of houses giving way to tiny scattered villages among rice fields and orchards and animal corrals and poultry farms. The paved road gradually turns into an unpaved country lane.

Just about where the town ends there was, next to the unpaved lane, a vast green field. At the very back of the field was a strange house dating from the British era. Some missionaries reportedly lived there then. In more recent times the house had been used as the base from which to give out to poor people American-donated milk (reconstituted from powder) and ghee. Some padre sahebs were in charge of this philanthropic activity. So there were missionaries again in this house – as if an echo of their earlier brethren! But since then the house was vacant and had fallen into disrepair. Its doors stood wide open and flapped in the wind.

As I said, there was something strange about this house – locally referred to as the Aynamahal, the Mirror House. This is not because there were any mirrors in the house. I will explain presently. The house itself was made of concrete and brick. Its walls were plastered and painted white. It was in the shape of a long solid rectangle, with rooms lined up in a row – all connected by a central row of doors. The front of the house that faced the lane was a short side of the

rectangle. From the main entry door there, the house continued, room after room, until it ended where a dense forest began. Here were some big leafy trees – very old trees. They made the back portion of the house rather dark and even portentous. Circling the entire house was a covered concrete veranda, its floor about two feet above the ground level. It was adorned with simple pillars. These gave the house the appearance of a once-opulent British Raj building. You could imagine Lord Clive or Lord Curzon once lived here with their liveried retinue in evidence all around.

As you walked down the length of the house through the house, from one room to the next, you would see frescoes on the walls on both sides. They were now decayed and indistinct. Even so, you could see that the frescoes on the two sides were mirror images of each other. If the Victorian British nobleman on horseback on your right had his riding crop in his right hand, the saheb on the left fresco had it in his left hand. Above one of the central connecting doors two mem-sahebs faced each other squarely, their opulent and luxurious hair flowing out to the right and to the left and transforming to become ocean waves. But the images were identical. And this was true for each room, although the scenes were all different. You got an eerie feeling that you might have entered some type of a space warp.



Starting in early winter one winter, people who lived directly across the lane noticed that late at night, some lights went on and off in the house. Nobody dared go in and check. Because of the woods in the back, the abandoned house looked even more sinister at night. And this situation was not helped by the fact that jackals and other small animals prowled and night birds made sounds in the canopy of the trees. But in time these residents noticed another thing. Those lights would come on only after their own house lights had been turned off. Then after a while those lights would go off too. If the residents turned on their own lights in the middle of the night and turned off, then after a while the same thing would happen in the Mirror House. It was as though the house were also in some type of time warp.

Needless to say, the matter was promptly referred to the Bagchi brothers. They would have attended to this immediately, but there was an insurmountable problem. You see, just about the only two people in Silchar who did not know about the derring-dos of the brothers were their parents! The brothers were afraid the parents would be too protective of them to let them go into situation

which might well entail some danger. Whenever the brothers went out on a caper, they had an innocuous cover story for their parents. But there was no conceivable cover story that would cover their staying out all night – which they would have to do in this case. All their previous haunted house capers involved just staying until after dark or going in before the crack of dawn. Those were easy to finesse with artful cover stories.

So the brothers fretted. They thought of all kinds of plans, but none survived close examination. Pajama parties were not in vogue in those days in that place – so the brothers could not say they would sleep over at a friend's house. The situation was truly hopeless. Then, when they were about to give up, the younger brother said one day: “Meramerir Ghar!”

Then the elder brother said: “Of course, Meramerir Ghar.” And the game was afoot.



About the middle of January, at the end of the winter solstice, there is the celebration of the Po'ush Sankranti, the harvest festival. Associated with this is a custom that is peculiar to the Sylhet-Silchar area and may be even much of Assam. But I have not seen this in West Bengal. So it cannot be said that this is a Bengali custom in general. But let us get to our point.

On the eve of the day of the festival a group of boys get together and plan the Meramerir Ghar. I do not know that girls participate in this. The boys find an open field and plant four bamboo poles in a square. Then they gather some ropes and go across the river Barak to where the newly-harvested rice fields lay, stretching before your eyes out to the limits of the horizon. The boys steal bunches of dry hay from the neatly piled haystacks, tie them in bundles with the ropes and carry them back. With this hay and more bamboo, they make four walls and a roof. A complete shed is now assembled. One wall is kept free at one edge so that it can serve as the door. In order that this shed not look like a box and more like a tiny toy house – a work of art – the roof is given a pitch. This lean-to is called Meramerir Ghar. I do not know what the origin or the significance of this name is. But the surface meaning is clear: Mera is ram, meri is ewe and ghar is house, or in this case, the lean-to. So there you have it: Meramerir Ghar = The Lean-to of the Ram and the Ewe.

When you are inside the lean-to, you are completely surrounded by the remnants of what was once a golden, undulating rice field. The remnant smell of the harvest permeates you and then your entire consciousness. You are in a

make-believe, a fantasy place – distanced from the real world.

In the evening, at a spot near the lean-to, a fire would be lit, scout-style. In this fire a picnic meal would be cooked. Then this cooking fire would be fed with more wood scraps to convert it to a campfire. The boys would sit around, eat and talk while staying warm on this very cold night. Eventually they would go inside the shed whose floor had been covered thickly with loose hay and sleep there – covering themselves with shawls and blankets. Very early next morning they would get up and walk to the river. This ordained ritual is the difficult part. They would have to take a dip in the ice cold water in that bitterly cold morning. Some go in willingly and others have to be dunked. Anyway, when they return, shivering, they set fire to the lean-to and bask in the roaring flames that reach for the sky. After this they would go home and be rewarded with a huge plate-full of assorted fancy sweets that the women of the house had labored to make the previous day, and probably over many days. Many of the sweets are made from ingredients reflecting the harvest.



What a perfect cover story for staying out all night! The brothers got together with two other pairs of boys who lived right next to the Mirror House: Brothers Shibu and Santu, and brothers Konkon and Ranjan. Since the majority of the boys in the group were from the Mirror House neighborhood, the lean-to of course would have to be built there – or such was the impeccable logic of the cover story. And what better open space there than right next to the Mirror House? An agreement was reached that the four local boys would not spend the night in the lean-to, at *their* request. The reason for this was never discussed.

The lean-to was built close to the lane and so about a hundred meters from the front door of the Mirror House. The brothers chose the location which would offer a good vantage on the entire house. They brought with them a hurricane lantern, a few candles and a full matchbox. They brought a large metal lid of an oil drum, so as to put the candle on it and avoid the risk of the hay catching fire. The elder brother brought the crochet he was working on – a single mango-pattern on white brocade. The younger brother brought a thriller called *Bishalgorer Duhshashon* – a Bengali version of *Dracula*.

All went well throughout the day. The picnic supper was delicious, and the six boys talked and told stories until about ten. Then the four boys left, promising to come and fetch the brothers early in the morning, and walk to the river all together. The Bagchi brothers lingered round the fire for a little longer.

Then they doused the fire, went inside the lean-to, lit the candle and stood it on the metal lid. They sat directly across from each other with the candle in the middle. The elder Bagchi started on his crochet and the younger stated to read.

Around about midnight the brothers came out and saw that all the lights in the neighborhood had gone out and the night rhythm had set in fully. There were night sounds from the woods. Jackals howled and owls hooted. The house, especially the back part of it, looked ominous. The elder brother then put down his crochet, being careful that the needles did not get tangled up. The younger brother put his open book face down, so he could start reading again right from where he had stopped: Jonathan Harker (the Bengali version of him) had just arrived in Dracula's Castle. Now they put out the candle and lit the lantern. The elder brother held the lantern in his right hand and the younger brother walked on his left. They proceeded towards the Mirror House.



When they climbed up the stairs and on to the veranda in front of the house, the elder brother said: "First, we will circle the veranda." So they turned right and walked slowly, looking in all directions. There was no sign of any movement in the house itself. It was particularly spooky when they rounded the back of the house. Finally, they came back around to the front and then entered the house proper. They advanced methodically, holding up the lantern to examine each room. Without any incidents they again reached the back of the house and retraced their path. As they were climbing down the front stairs the elder brother said: "Well, nothing so far. We'll keep a watch from the lean-to and if nothing happens, come back again in two hours."

No sooner had he finished saying that than they saw a sight that sent chills up their spines, even though fear was not a sentiment known to the brothers. There was a light inside the lean-to! Clearly, the candle had been re-lit. They could see its wavering light through the porous bamboo-and-hay wall. The brothers looked at each other. They paused a moment to collect themselves, held hands and proceeded with quiet determination.

When they came to the door of the lean-to, they saw that it was shut. The younger brother, without any hesitation, pulled it open and looked inside, the elder brother looking over his shoulder. There, on the hay-covered floor, facing each other across the lit candle, were seated the Bagchi brothers. The elder brother was crocheting and the younger brother was reading the book. They did not look up. Presently, after offering only a momentary glance at this scene, the

candle went out. When the real Bagchi brother, the elder one, brought up the lantern to shine inside the lean-to, there was nobody there. The crochet was where they had left it, needle and all and the book was as they had left it.

Thinking that the lantern might have been a deterrent to whatever had presented itself before them, they extinguished it and left it outside. They then came in to carefully examine the floor in candle light, having re-lighted the candle. There was absolutely nothing to substantiate what they saw. The younger brother then put a piece of straw in the open page of the book to mark his place and put the book away in their knapsack. The elder brother did the same with the crochet. There was not going to be any more leisure that night.

When the brothers came out, the lantern had vanished. They looked towards the house. They saw in the distance two boys climbing the stairs to the veranda of the Mirror House. The taller boy had the lantern in his left hand and the shorter boy was walking on his right. The brothers stood like statues while the two boys slowly circled the veranda fully and then entered the house. Through the windows the brothers saw the light pause in each room, move about in that room and then proceed to the next room. Those boys then came back and climbed down the stairs. The lantern went out. Those boys vanished into the darkness.

The brothers went forward and found the lantern next to the stairs. They lit it and went over the house painstakingly. Nothing of any significance could be found. They kept looking back to the lean-to and could see nothing but the candle light, which they had not extinguished this time. They came back and everything was normal. Nothing further happened. Soon the sun began to break upon the festive day.

The brothers lit the outside fire again and made two large mugs of tea. Then they talked.

First, the elder brother: "You noticed what I noticed about those boys?"

"I think so."

"But there is absolutely no proof – nothing tangible – of what we saw. Our minds could have been playing tricks on us."

"I suppose. And without any evidence, we cannot expect others to believe this story."

What had the two brothers noticed? They, both highly observant, had noticed that while they themselves parted their hair to their left, the boys they saw parted their hair to their right. Otherwise, the boys looked exactly like themselves.

The younger brother, not knowing what else to do until the four local boys arrived, took out his book. He opened where the straw was and exclaimed: “This bookmark is not where I left off reading the last time. Dracula and Jonathan Harker are dining together! It is as though some more pages have been read!”

The brothers were stunned. Then the younger brother spoke: “The crochet?!”

They took out the crochet. The elder brother had done half of the mango, lengthwise – the half containing the point of the mango. The smooth half had yet to be done.

The pattern had been finished. But not with the smooth half. Someone had inverted and repeated the pointed half. So there was a mango with two pointed halves.



Basab De

SHUJON MAJHI THE ROWER OF THREE RIVERS



Francisco Zuniga, Mujeres al Mar

সুজন মাঝি,
তিনটে নদীর নেয়ে

1. HARITIKAR



fter meandering on its majestic way from Silchar and beyond, the life-giving river Barak – about ten miles past Badarpur Junction – splits into two equally life-giving rivers: the northward Surma and the southward Kushiara. They in turn would create their own lush valleys, their own miniature civilizations. The word Junction though refers not to the river junction, but a railroad junction. Badarpur is a veritable gateway for great many people in Cachar District to the rest of India. Three railroads – one from Silchar and Hailakandi, one from Karimganj and one from Lumding – converge here. You come to Badarpur Junction via the Silchar or the Karimganj line, change trains and be on your way to Lumding Junction. From there you can connect to any place in India you wish.

But to the cognoscenti, Badarpur Junction then had a third claim to fame: The absolutely yummy samosas, brought right to your window by the vendors on the station platform. Unlike the typical Bengali samosas – shingaras as they are called – which are golf ball-sized, the Badarpur samosas were tennis ball-sized. The casing was flaky and crunchy and the potato inside, delectably spicy and soft, was not all mashed up. There was some bite to them. Many people chose to have a three-item snack: a samosa and an oversized rasgolla served in a dried shaal leaf and sweet, milked tea served in a disposable clay cup. If anyone passed through Badarpur Junction without tasting at least one piping hot samosa, he probably was not a very happy camper.

The main highway through Badarpur Junction that also gave access to all of India if you traveled by bus or car, was some distance from the station, perhaps not quite a mile. The local thoroughfare that connected the station to the highway was really where all the action was. It was the downtown. It was lined contiguously on both sides with all sorts of kiosks and open air shops and even the main open air market – a rather haphazard affair. For a little town where only a couple of thousand people lived, this street was inexplicably crowded – all day and all evening. People just seemed to be simply milling around. You could not walk five feet in a straight line.

And such was the most exotic milieu of our troika – Alak, Tazamil and Prosenjit. The three boys were of the same age and when the story opens, all in Class VIII of the Boys' High School. They hung out together in all the places mentioned above, but whenever they could borrow two or three bicycles, they

headed for the junction of the three rivers. It was a place of wild beauty and mystery – evocative of river songs and nature poems. The small village there, Haritikar, was sparsely populated. And out of this mysteryscape came a mystery man who would fascinate the troika to no end and would eventually preoccupy them completely. This man was Shujon Majhi.



No one noticed when Shujon Majhi came to the Badarpur area or how and where he settled in. Initially he was seen mostly in Haritikar. Only after he procured himself a small rowboat and started a brisk business ferrying people across the river or giving tours of the three rivers – a rather novel concept there at that time – did people start taking notice of him. If Majhi was his actual family name, it was fitting. For it meant boatman or ferryman. The name Shujon simply meant good people. And indeed he was good people. Residents of Badarpur began to like him a lot. Whenever they saw him, they did not miss the opportunity to say out loud his beautiful name. “Shujon Majhi, O Shujon Majhi, where do you hurry off to? Come stop with us a moment. Chat a little,” the shopkeepers along the street would entreat him. There was something about his company that was naturally uplifting. It was highly sought after.

Whenever people asked him where his home in Badarpur was, he would reply with a broad smile: “Here and there, far and near.” Soon everybody got the message that he did not want to give out his home address. People stopped asking him. But from various observations this theory was developed: He had built himself a tiny one-room bamboo hut in the forest on the wedge of land created by the splitting of the Barak. This was a completely desolate, unfrequented area. Occasionally in the evenings, from certain angles, some had seen a light within the forest there. That was thought to be the hurricane lantern in his hut. What he did all alone in an isolated hovel in a forest was a question that added greatly to the mystique of Shujon Majhi.



Basab De

He also supplemented his boatman's income by fishing. It was not difficult to bag a couple of large Rohu or Mahashol fish if you knew where to fish. And Shujon Majhi knew. He then gathered up his catch and proceeded to a well-to-do residential area of Badarpur to sell the merchandize directly. Fresh fish right off the river was in great demand and fetched a handsome price. He had got himself a used Phillips bicycle. That was his mode of transportation between Haritkar and Badarpur. His catch, when he had any, would hang from the handlebar of the bicycle.

That was how Shujon Majhi met the Shome household. Aurobindo Shome, Alak's father, was of the landed gentry. He had a large two-story brick-and-mortar house at the center of a large field. The house was impeccably white-washed and was so designed that it almost looked like a marble palace. The house had a large poured-concrete roof that served as a terrace area for gatherings and social functions.

One day Shujon Majhi showed up at the Shome doorstep with a large Rohu fish. Mrs. Shome immediately saw her opportunity here. She made him promise to bring his catch straight to her. Chances were she would buy everything. This was of course most suitable for Shujon Majhi, for it meant he would not have to uncertainly go from door to door, looking to see if anyone was home and if they had need for fish on that day.

He came about a couple of times a week. The children of the house – Alak

and his twin five-year old sisters Urmi and Urvi, short for Urmila and Urvashi – were easily drawn to him. They chitchatted with him and found out quickly that he was a great storyteller. Not stories as such, but more accurately, Shujon Majhi's life story. There were all kinds of anecdotes of which he was the protagonist, the hero. And what a hero he was! He was a detective, he was a big-game hunter, he was a high mountain explorer and a desert adventurer! The children were enthralled. It did not occur to them to ask him why he was leading the placid life he was now leading. They probably figured he was going through a phase of life – a sojourn – by his choice. Just another life adventure.

Soon the storytelling sessions expanded and became regularized. Shujon came on Saturday evenings, not to sell fish, but just to visit the children. From the house across the street, the three brothers Tazamil, Mazamil and Hafatul joined. From two doors down came Prosenjit and his younger sister Promila, nicknamed Mila. She was the same age as Urmi and Urvi. It was then full house. The whole party moved to the roof where the session began in right earnest. The setting sun on the horizon and the darkling sky overhead provided the magic and aided the spinning of atmospheric mysteries. There was of course no homework on Saturday evenings and so the sessions could go on right until dinner time.

There were several softly padded mats spread out on the roof, some right against the low guard wall. So you could sit down, resting your back against the wall. This is how Shujon Majhi sat and held court. The boys sat round. Little Urmi and Urvi lay flat on their stomachs, with the chins propped on closed fists. When the story came to particular moment of suspense, both their mouths opened wide in concert – as their eyes widened. Mila sat cross-legged between Urmi and Urvi, with her hands on the shoulders of the twins.



Sanchari De

There was also, more often than not, an adult listener, Alak's maternal aunt Anjoli-mashi. Anjoli-mashi had come to Badarpur only shortly before the storytelling sessions began. She had been orphaned a year ago while she was studying at the famed Bethune College in Calcutta. She stayed on at the college hostel and finished her BA degree with First Class Honors in Philosophy. After that the Shomes insisted that she make Badarpur her home. The idea was for her to recover from the grief and then either go for an MA degree or get married – as she chose. In the meantime she took a job as a teacher of English at the Girls' High School. Though only twenty years of age, she quickly became the de facto guardian of the Shome children. But she was also a friend to them, a friend with whom they could share confidences. When necessary, she shielded them from parental wrath for some mischief committed. She was a strikingly beautiful woman who soon acquired the moniker 'the most beautiful woman in Badarpur.'

Anjoli-mashi sat some distance from the group on a mora, a wickerwork stool. No one ever saw her actually speak to Shujon Majhi. But the children could not help notice that whenever Anjoli-mashi came and sat down on the mora, Shujon Majhi became very self-conscious. His speech changed as though he were now performing on a theater stage and he projected his voice farther. The troika figured that Anjoli-mashi was there as a parental observer, to make certain that no inappropriate tales were told to the children.



The Tale of the Punagiri Man-eater

Boys and girls, this evening I will tell you a shikar story – the hunting story of how I vanquished the fierce Man-eater of Punagiri. See this scar mark on my upper right arm? This is where the tiger clamped me in his jaws. That was nearly the end of Shujon Majhi the Rower of Three Rivers. But if Lord Krishna preserves you, who can destroy you? So it was instead the tiger that had to meet his maker.

The villagers of Punagiri – a hamlet which sits on the river Sarda in the district of Nainital near the Nepal border – were terrorized by a man-eating tiger which had claimed seven lives, including two women and one child. Before that, the tiger had been operating in the Garhwal district where he had killed fifty-seven

people. He then made his way to Punagiri, killing twenty-three more people on the way. All the efforts by many expert big-game hunters had failed to kill the tiger. The village Panchayet of Punagiri then approached my friend Jim, the famed hunter and the slayer of many a man-eating tiger. Jim had more or less retired from hunting at the time, and so he said: “Why don’t you ask my good friend Shujon? If anyone can put paid to this tiger, Shujon can.” And that was how I happened to come to the rescue of the village.

It all began when this tiger fought with a wild boar and was left crippled. He could no longer hunt for his natural prey, an act that required great speed and agility. So he zeroed in on the easy kills: humans. In Punagiri men, women and children from the village used to roam freely in the forest without any fear. They collected green leaves as fodder for their cattle and also firewood and honey. But this tiger visited stark fear upon the village.

I came to the town of Nainital and trekked for a day to Champawat. This is where Jim had killed the dreaded Champawat tigress – one of the most infamous man-eaters in history. From Champawat I arrived in Punagiri the next day. I received extensive briefings from the villagers. I declined their offer of providing a hunting party and a team of beaters, saying that I preferred to hunt alone, on foot. I used the same technique here that us big-game hunters normally use. I made a rough map of the hilly terrain and charted the positions of the kills on it. That gave me an idea of the pattern of movement of the man-eater. Then I focused on the place of his very last kill – which had been only the day before – and expanded my search as I spiraled my way out from that location.

I first viewed the remains of the latest kill and was revolted by the sight. But I best not describe it. I recovered and started on my way. Soon I happened upon a hillock with a gulch bordering it – a nearly perfect place for tigers to hide out. As I started up this hill, I caught a very faint trace of that special smell. I will readily admit to you, boys and girls, that even Shujon Majhi felt afraid at that moment. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. As I came round a bend, I saw a nice flat ledge up a ways. I approached it most cautiously.

It was then that I heard a low growl. This is the sound that makes the bravest of hunters go weak in the knees. You can hear your heart pounding. Your mouth goes dry and your arms feel too weak to handle the rifle. But all seasoned hunters recover from this, as did I. I now rounded a large tree and came in clear view of the ledge. There I saw him!

The tiger was lying up on the ledge. He seemed to be asleep. I held my fine

hunting rifle, a German Manlicker Schooner, in the firing stance – its bolt slid home – and approached the tiger most stealthily. But I was too focused on the tiger and was not watching the ground I was walking on. Suddenly I stepped on a loose rock and lost my balance and fell. The rifle got thrown some distance away, but being the fine instrument it was, it did not discharge on impact. In an instant the tiger was on top of me. I smelled his horrible smell, and the stench of his warm breath right on my face caused me nearly to faint. The tiger had closed his jaws on my upper right arm.



Mannlicher-Schönauer 1910

But Shujon Majhi the Rower of Three Rivers is not one to cower long upon looking death in the face. I kept my wits about. With great maneuvering I was able to put the toe of my hunting boot through the strap of the rifle and pull it close – while all the time enduring the searing pain and pushing the tiger away from my body with my one free hand, the left hand. I now used that hand to reach the butt of the rifle. I grabbed the weapon and curled my thumb around the trigger. With a contortion of my body and my arm that today seems nearly impossible, I pressed the muzzle of the rifle against the tiger's temple and squeezed the trigger. I heard the thunderous roar of the Manlicker and felt the tiger go limp over me.

Boys and girls, you would not believe how large the tiger was. He was much larger than anything Jim ever killed. But what I have not told you up to now is this: The surprise of surprises! As I was examining the dead beast I found that it was a tigress! And only a few feet away, inside some bushes, there were three tiger cubs huddling together in great fear and confusion. All this made me suddenly feel a pang of sadness, but I consoled myself saying that the beast needed killing. I probably did her a favor by putting her out of her misery. It occurred to me that I could capture at least two of the cubs and take them to the village. But my instinct told me to let them go.

As I was walking back to the village I saw a large group of villagers coming

my way, giving out shouts of great rejoicing. They had heard the shot. First they dressed my wound with a jungle poultice. Then I asked them to go and retrieve the body of the tigress. It was necessary for all the villages to view the dead beast in order to psychologically recover from the stark fear that had befallen the place. I did not say anything about the cubs and since upon their return, they did not mention seeing any cubs, I figured the babies had gone into the jungle to forage on their own. You see, the tigress needed to kill humans in order to feed her cubs.

And now I will tell you how the village feted me. That is an entire story in itself...



2. THE FAR

If the younger children believed Shujon Majhi's stories *in toto*, the troika of course realized that these were great exaggerations and more likely total inventions. But stories were stories and the storyteller was entitled to great license. The taller the tale, the more enjoyable it would be. It was not uncommon for a story to be told in first person, the storyteller assuming the role of the protagonist. So the troika never expressed any doubts in front of Shujon Majhi. Nor did they say anything to disillusion the younger children. Secretly, however, they checked the little checkable facts Shujon Majhi wove into the stories. In the above instance, the librarian of the Public Library confirmed that there indeed was a Punagiri on the river Sarda near the Nepal border, and indeed there was a great hunter in that area by the name of Jim Corbett. The librarian even mentioned a book *The Man-eaters of Kumaon* written by Corbett. However, the Library did not have any information on hunting rifles. So the boys approached Mr. Shome. Mr. Shome was used to getting all kinds of unusual requests from the boys and never inquired about their purpose or expressed any surprise. He just made sure he got them the correct answer, however he could. And that was not always easy. Badarpur, a large village rather than a small town, was not the best place for information research. In this case Mr. Shome checked with some military-type Englishmen at the Cachar Club in Silchar. They told him that there indeed was a rifle called Mannlicher-Schönauer. But it was Austrian, not German.

The more the little facts checked out, the more the three boys were confused as to who Shujon Majhi really was. On one occasion they saw him in the Ration Card office, affixing his tipshoi, or the thumb print, where a signature was required. He was completely illiterate! So how would he even read in a magazine about an Austrian rifle? And if he could read all right but not write, why did he then mispronounce the name of the weapon? How did he come upon all these little facts that were neither common knowledge nor commonly available?

Even as Shujon Majhi settled down in the Badarpur area, he would disappear from time to time, for a couple of weeks at a time. When he returned there would be a story of a fresh adventure he had just undergone. Each such adventure would be good for several story sessions. Thus the 'material' for the storytelling became not only inexhaustible, but also 'hot off the press' – so to speak.



The Tale of the Tibetan Yak-herder

Boys and girls, this evening I will tell you the story of the hermit of the high Himalayas. This is my latest adventure from which I returned only yesterday. See my black toe here? That is frost bite from my standing barefoot too long on ice.

The story takes place in the glacier country on the high Himalayas. For some time, mountain climbers and their sherpas have reported catching a glimpse – but only a distant glimpse – of a hermit walking on the ice where three glaciers come together. He is clad completely in white and has flowing white beard and long white hair. He nearly blends with the white background of the ice. Thus he looks almost as elusive as the Himalayan snow leopard. It is almost as though he is cloud-like – not real. As the stories of these sightings grew, some villagers in the foothills who know me learned about this. They said: “We must tell about this Hermit of Three Glaciers to our friend Shujon Majhi the Rower of Three Rivers. He is most interested in things adventurous and things mysterious and things mystical. And this matter here is all these rolled in one.” So they sent me word. And that is how I set out for Nepal two weeks ago today.

I arrived in the village on a high plateau and spent two days there to acclimatize myself to the height. I collected all the necessary information as to the locations of the various sightings. On the third day before dawn I set out for that place with a knapsack containing a one-man tent and supply of food and water to last three days. It was a day’s hike to the place. I arrived there in the late evening and saw the spectacular display of the setting sun on the glaciers and the ice fields beyond. It was the most beautiful scene I had ever seen. Starting at the toe of the lowest glacier spread spring meadows where wildflowers of all colors had bloomed. They were fed by a clear blue lake formed of ice-melt. It was for me a deeply spiritual experience to just stand there and watch the light fall over the vast expanse of glassy white. I felt so much at one with nature that I wanted to feel even closer to her. So I removed my trekker’s boots and socks and stood there feeling the icy touch of nature underfoot. But I overdid it and that is how I got the black toe.

I kept a vigil that evening until the visibility became poor. I moved some

boulders and rocks to create a flat spot on the lateral moraine of the glacier and pitched my tent. Soon I fell asleep from the day's tiring hike. But I was up before dawn and could watch that light which had failed last night slowly return. I commenced my vigil, systematically scanning the horizon – both near and far. But soon the skies clouded over and got ominously dark. Lightning streaks started to cleave the sky over the vast icescape. It was the eeriest experience. I stood there, feeling that I had been transported to an otherworldly setting.



Basab De

Nevertheless, I kept scanning the horizon 360 degrees. Absolutely nothing there except the whiteness in the distance and the rainbow of wildflowers and the blue of the lake nearby. But repeatedly my eyes got drawn back to the sky with its fiery display over the glacier. Now it seemed to me that various shapes were forming on this screen – so to speak. The shapes were nearly discernible, but not quite.

And then I saw him! His shape I mean, on that screen. A sadhu with long flowing white beard down to his waist, and flowing white hair covering his shoulders. He was clad completely in white. He appeared just for a brief second, but I saw him as clearly as I am seeing you now, Mazamil and Hafatul. It was not an image or an apparition, but a regular human! He was holding a walking staff in his right hand, taller than he himself. I also had the fleeting sense that he

nodded to me and raised his staff. But of course he was too far for me to have seen anything like that.

I stood there petrified for a long time. It was only when the sky cleared and the sun came up bright on me that I came back to reality. But still dazed, I gathered up my things and started back. When I was close to the village, in that mysterious evening mountain light and near a flowing stream, I saw a very old Tibetan woman in ancient, frayed body rags, herding three yaks alongside the stream. I stopped and greeted her and asked if she had heard about the sadhu. She replied: “That sadhu he is not a man of here and now. He lives in another time. But he can be found today at a conjunction of nature where three of nature’s flowing things come together. It could be three singing rivers, three silent glaciers, three howling winds mingling in a mountain crevasse. He is called the Keeper of the Three Streams: The Past, the Present and the Future.”

“But where does he live?” I asked.

“The Far. It is a place of the solitude of moon-rivers and mist-mountains, of the silence of green hills and snowy fields.”

I looked around me and it seemed like she was describing exactly the place we were standing in right then. I asked: “You mean this place we are seeing here now?”

“No. You cannot see the Far. It shows itself to you.”



Basab De

So saying, she walked on. I tried to ask her something – for so many questions were crowding in my mind – but in reply she just waved goodbye. When I came to the village, I asked my friends in the village about the yak-herder. They were most surprised. They said: “There is not a single yak in this area, much less a yak-herder. And we know all the Tibetan families here. There’s no such old woman.”

And that, boys and girls, was how I met me the first time. The sadhu was me.



3. SUNSET AND EVENING STAR

When it came to analytic brainpower, the troika was not lacking at all. Tazamil never met a puzzle he could not solve. Alak always secured the highest marks in mathematics. And Prosenjit was a formidable opponent in chess. And yet the more time went on, the more the Shujon Majhi phenomenon became an enigma for the troika. They noted and discussed each fact they thought was significant and in this way, developed a mental case file. They asked Shujon casual questions about him, such questions as were normally asked of normal acquaintances. They never let on that they saw some deep mystery in him, or that they were investigating.

One Saturday evening Shujon Majhi arrived and found that the Shome household was a beehive of social activity. A number of visitors as well as the family had crowded into the living room. Shujon Majhi was going to make a quick and unseen retreat but the children spotted him. He was ushered into the living room and the ever-dignified Mr. Shome warmly introduced him to the guests as a family friend. The guests, it turned out, were here to negotiate a marriage. They had traveled from Karimganj for this occasion. The prospective bridegroom sat there – smart, handsome and well-dressed. He was introduced as an engineer with the railroad system. His parents, two sisters and an uncle made up the rest of the party. The prospective bride, Anjoli-mashi, sat on a two-person sofa by herself, with a vacant look about her. There had been placed before the guests large plates of assorted sweets and ornate cups of tea. For such was how the bride-viewing ritual went – with a showy display of fine hospitality. The next step would be to determine if the principals liked each other, and the subsequent plans would be made, or not made, accordingly.

Shujon Majhi was ushered in and almost forced into the only empty seat, in the same sofa as Anjoli-mashi. She moved only enough to make room for him and no more. It seemed that she had forgotten to put the expected social distance between herself and the young man unrelated to her, even in the middle of this delicate negotiation where she was under intense scrutiny. A plate of sweets and a cup of tea appeared very quickly and were placed before Shujon Majhi. His face now looked flushed. He appeared completely discombobulated by being drawn into the gathering of the gentry in this way, and being seated as one of their equal. At the first chance he got to speak, he managed a few words in an attempt to quickly escape this uncomfortable situation: “If there’s no story

session this evening, I could attend to some urgent business in town to my advantage. So I best be off.”

The usual protestations were made and he was requested fervently to stay a while. But with a rather uncharacteristic firmness, he excused himself. He told Urmi and Urvi: “If you like, I will come tomorrow evening.” The twins took him up on that and made him promise he would return the next day. They would save his untouched plate of sweets for him to have tomorrow, they said. They also explained with elaborate logic that the cup of tea could not be saved, for it would get cold. But a fresh cup would be made.

Shujon Majhi kept his promise and appeared the next evening with the story of the Three Niles. After that evening, things went back to the old routine. And nothing came of the bride-viewing ceremony. Although the bridegroom’s side expressed great enthusiasm to proceed with this matter right at the conclusion of their visit that Saturday, ‘the most beautiful woman in Badarpur’ turned down the proposal on the following Monday.



The Tale of the Dark Rebel

Boys and girls, today’s story takes you to Mishor, the place the world knows today as Egypt. This is the story of the Boatman of the Three Niles. But before we go there, I must let you in on a secret about myself that I have jealously guarded thus far.

I belong to a very rare group of people known as Jonmoshmo. Jonmo, as you know, means Birth. Shmoro means Remembrance. So Jonmoshmo means One Who Remembers His Past Life. I do – many lives in fact. But this story takes place thousands of years ago when I was a high government official in the House of the Pharaoh. I do not wish to identify the Pharaoh, but let us call him Pharaoh Ridbanipal. I was most trusted and was given great responsibilities as well as great rewards.

The Pharaoh, however, was a very cruel and repressive ruler. All over the land discontent against him was brewing just under the surface. An underground movement had organized itself with the object of ousting the Pharaoh. One evening the leader of the movement approached me stealthily in a dark corner of the marketplace. He said that from my actions they had concluded that I was

a good person at heart and that they wanted me to join them. I was most moved by what he said and after a period of great agony and deep soul-searching, I secretly joined their group. Before long I became a valued member there, as I could help them by using my high official position to their advantage.

The Pharaoh's spies, however, were on to me and I sensed that the noose was closing in around my neck. So one night I fled the palace and went into hiding. I disguised myself as a boatman, procured a felucca and started rowing up the Nile. I stopped wherever it caught my fancy to stop. After months, I entered Nubia and arrived where the rivers Blue Nile and White Nile join to form the great river Nile. I found this place after my heart and settled down. I used the felucca for fishing as well as ferrying people back and forth across the river.

One day an evidently high-born young lady arrived at the river bank. How could I tell she was high-born? Well, just as easily as I can tell you young ladies – Urmi, Urvi and Mila – are high-born, just by your most elegant and dignified appearance and how you carry yourselves with such grace. Now, this lady wanted to go across the river to visit a relative. She was the most beautiful human being I ever saw – in that ancient time I mean – and I thanked Almighty Amon Ra for the mere opportunity of being in her proximity. But as if Ra had heard my prayer and was pleased, the lady deigned to speak to me. For the entire two hours that it took to cross the mighty river of strong currents, we conversed nonstop. When she alit at the other bank she asked if I could wait for two hours and then ferry her back. I instantly agreed, forgoing all other fares and fishing for the rest of the day.

On our return trip the sun was already setting and the evening star was becoming visible. It was pure magic. I wondered if she felt the same way. As if to answer that question, she looked at the sky and said: "Sunset and evening star. Beautiful hour, isn't it?"

To my great surprise and great pleasure, Tanafriti – her name meant She of the Beautiful Land – came again a few days later, and then again and again. It became so that she no longer visited anyone at the other bank. We just crossed the river and turned around and crossed it again – making for a solid four-hour tryst. Yes indeed, a lover's tryst is what it became, and one day we both acknowledged this to each other. Then she said: "Kamenwati (for that was my name, meaning – coincidentally – the Dark Rebel), I am afraid this is going to end badly for us. There is no way my family would allow me to marry a lowly fisherman of the Nile. They would want me to marry a person with a high

position in the society – such as a high official of the Pharaoh. In fact they have been pressing me lately and I am afraid that my marriage is imminent. I may be able to come just one more time, in two days, but after that we may not see each other again.”

She said she would use these two days to paint me something, for me to remember her by.

Now I saw that either I had to act or she was going to be gone forever from my life. But acting, that is telling her who I really was, was also risky – not only for my own self but also for the cause. I was torn between my love for her and my allegiance to the cause.

I then hit upon an idea. I also could paint a little. So I made a fabric art of a high official being ceremonially installed by the goddesses Blue Nile and White Nile. And I made the face of the official look as much like my face as I could do, by viewing my own reflection in water. I hoped that this would clue her in to my real identity, with absolutely no secrets betrayed.

When she came two days later she presented me with a Papyrus painting of the goddess Maat. However, the face of the goddess looked exactly like that of Tanafriti. I was overwhelmed by this gift. Then I gave her mine. She looked at it a long while. She looked back and forth between the picture of the official and my face. Then she sat a while wrapped in thought. At last she said: “It will not be easy, but I will find an excuse to put off the wedding. I will wait for you as long as I can without causing my parents grief.”

Thus, absolutely nothing was said between us but my goal was achieved. Boys and girls, I am happy to say that this story ended happily for me. The rebels vanquished the Pharaoh and I was installed to my original station in life. Tanafriti’s parents accepted me with great joy.



Batik screen by Gopa De

However, the story does not quite end here. It turned out that Tanafriti and I had both heard a clear call from the Far. The homebound everyday life was not for us, no matter how opulent and how glamorous a life that was. One day we acknowledged this to each other. We left everything behind and headed into the deep of the Sahara. Between the harsh sands and the cool oases we found ourselves again. That was really where we lived happily ever after.



Two years passed since Shujon Majhi had turned up in the Badarpur area. The boys were all in Class X and their school-leaving examination, the Matriculation, was upon them. By now Shujon Majhi and the Saturday evening storytelling sessions had become as integral a part of life as Saturdays themselves.

Alak's mother, being the affectionate person and the fine hostess she was, always invited Shujon Majhi to stay for dinner. But he always declined with giving profuse thanks and making excuses. It seemed that he did not feel comfortable eating with the gentry. But sometimes the younger children pressed hard, holding his hands tightly, and he yielded. On such occasions there would be a session after dinner in which the younger children would be absent. They would be abed, fast asleep. There would be only Shujon Majhi and the troika. Here, more adult conversation took place. One day Tazamil asked: "Shujon-chacha, what does The Rower of Three Rivers mean?"

"It means that I ply the waters where three rivers connect – whether it be Barak splitting into Surma and Kushiara, or Blue Nile and White Nile joining to form the Nile."

That was not the answer Tazamil, and perhaps the other boys, were expecting. Something about that wide night on the open roof terrace under the starry sky caused the boys to want to press their advantage further. "That is just a description. Surely there is a deeper meaning?!" asked Alak.

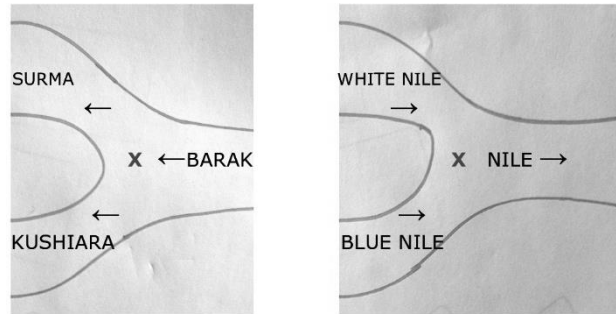
Suddenly a line had been crossed. The boys had developed among themselves a tacit understanding that they would never directly interrogate the mystery man. But now a question was posed that was clearly not a question that would be asked of an illiterate boatman or a fishmonger. All *four* would have understood this.

For some time this evening, portentous dark clouds had been gathering to the north – a great rainstorm was staging itself there. The air had started to get cold and even to feel a little moist. The overall atmospherics now seemed somehow to color the mood of the conversation here on this open roof terrace.

After a long silence Shujon Majhi spoke in a very calm voice: "All right, young men. In a few months you will be in college, you will be treated as full-fledged adults. You have asked me a sincere adult question and I owe you a sincere adult answer. So here it is.

"Place yourself precisely at the node where the three bands representing Barak, Surma and Kushiara meet. Imagine the flow of the river is the flow of

time. Then Barak behind you represents the Past. It is completely known to you because you have come through it, you have lived it. Ahead of you is the ambiguity: which river should you take – Surma or Kushiara? This is the essential ambiguity of the Future, the Unknown. If you take Surma, then Kushiara is the Future that might have been. All humans, at all times, are standing at such a decision point, which is the Present.



“When you come to the Niles, however, all the arrows are reversed. Behind you are the Blue Nile and White Nile and ahead of you the great Nile. So now it seems that the Future, the Nile, is unambiguous. But the Past is ambiguous. If you came down White Nile, then what did the Blue Nile represent?”

Shujon Majhi paused to see if his listeners had any questions. None had. But it was at this point that the three boys noticed, for the first time, that there had all along been one more listener. Anjoli-mashi had come up quietly and had stood in the shadows. Shujon Majhi continued: “Now, who is the person for whom the Past has a duality and the Future is clear? It is the spiritual seeker, the roaming ascetic, the white-clad sadhu on the high Himalayas and naked sannyasi in Varanasi. For each of these men, the Future is clear – but not in the practical sense. Sure, the Himalayan sadhu could die in an avalanche tomorrow. But such matters are not in the reckoning for him. He has heard one clear call and he knows clearly where he is going. There is no ambiguity.

“And how is the Past a duality? Because, in the first instance, he has lived a practical life like the rest of us. But equally well, he has lived an inner life – that inner torment that caused him to leave everything behind.

“So when you ply the waters near the node of three rivers, that is, you step out of that single decision point which is the Present and you venture out in various directions, you are exploring the mortal life, the spiritual life, the astral life – in all dimensions. You are the Rower of Three Rivers.”

Somewhere from the bushes in the garden a night bird called out and broke

the silence that followed the speech. This added to the eerie sensation the boys now felt. What they just heard was not, by any stretch of logic, the speech of a rural boatman. Something had changed forever. Next time they would see Shujon Majhi by broad daylight, they would *know* they were speaking to a different man.

Now Anjoli-mashi spoke: “Boys all, it is time to call it a night and let your illustrious guest be on his way. It is a long way to go in the dark and the rainstorm may break any time now.”

This was the very first time Anjoli-mashi referred to Shujon Majhi in his presence, even if in the third person. The fishmonger stood up and almost instinctively did a Namaskar to the most beautiful woman in Badarpur, with his head bowed low.

That night he pedaled home in a great sense of ecstasy all the way, every inch of the way. When he arrived at the river bank, the wind had picked up and was battering the coconut trees mercilessly.

As he now placed his bicycle in the dinghy and started to row back home to the wedge, the storm finally broke. A fierce downpour was accompanied by equally fierce winds. But even as Shujon Majhi struggled to keep control of his boat – his clothing all completely drenched – he had a feeling that the great bowl of the darkling sky overhead was filled end to end this night with a nameless joy. But then, perhaps because of the very portent of storm and thunder, a strange thought came to him. He did not want that thought to mar his moment. But it was there: Is this the end of all adventure?



Basab De

4. SCIENCE TEACHER NILOTPOL BABU

For the next two days the boys had not met one another and Shujon Majhi had not turned up. Nothing unusual about that. Early the evening of the third day as Alak was returning home from a vigorous bike ride, he saw Shujon Majhi coming from the opposite direction – pedaling towards Haritikar. They stopped by the side of the road, sat on their bikes with one foot on the ground and chitchatted for a few minutes. Then, out of the blue, Shujon Majhi said: “Alak, I am about to embark on my ultimate adventure. I did not want to say anything in front of the children, but now that we are alone, I am letting you know. This can be very dangerous and I may never return.”

Alak took this to be a continuation of the tall tales of the past. But to humor Shujon Majhi he said: “That sounds most ominous. What is this adventure about?”

“Remember the white-clad, white-bearded Himalayan sadhu I told you about? I also told you that that was me in another life. I want to go to his timeframe and visit him. I have found a way to do so. But I am not sure if I can safely return to the present timeframe.”

“Well, why even try it then?”

“It is hard to explain. I have heard in my mind the call of the Far.”

“And when do you plan to answer this call?”

“Tonight. But Alak, there is a request I would like to make of you. If I have not returned in two weeks, I shall probably not return. In that case please tell everyone in your house – including the three elders – that I liked them very very much. Each one of them.”

By now Alak got the rising sense that this tale was different from all the other tall tales. But beyond that he did not know what to make of this. He said some words that he thought would be appropriate – good adventure, safe return and such – and took his leave, saying: “I will see you in two weeks.”

“I too hope you will see *me*.”

Alak did not miss the stress on ‘me’ and thought this was rather odd.

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Two weeks passed but Shujon Majhi did not return. After the third week the troika went to the river landing in Haritikar and made inquiries. No, no one had seen him lately. One more week passed. But now it was just a month before the great Matriculation Examination for the troika. The school let out so this month

could be used for intensive preparation at home for this all-important examination. The life of the boys went into a very strict routine: study, eat, sleep. That was all. Absolutely no time for anything else. The whole family tiptoed around the scholar, making sure no distractions occurred. All visiting and socializing were suspended.

So it was that the Shujon Majhi issue had to be placed in abeyance for a time. The children missed the storytelling sessions, but knew that these were only temporarily suspended because of the big brothers' exam.

The examination itself lasted four days. The boys did well. After the last test on the last day the troika emerged from the schoolhouse in the late afternoon, completely sapped of energy. This was the time for decompression, for celebrating and going wild. But they were all too exhausted by the month-long ordeal to think of any such thing right now. So they decided at least to visit one of their favorite haunts nearby, the Station Platform, before going home to collapse in their beds. Ahead lay three months of continuous leisure. For that was how long it took for the examination papers to be evaluated and the results to be announced. After that the boys would be off to college and to full adulthood.

As they entered the platform – so familiar to them in every detail – they immediately spotted something that was glaringly out of place. Or someone, actually. At the far end of the platform, on a wooden bench under a shade tree, was seated a man clad in sparkling white, with long, flowing, white beard and white hair. The whiteness of the clothes stood in clear anachronism to what one normally saw in sweaty, dusty and sooty Badarpur. Any white attires here quickly yellowed. The man's tall walking staff – also not a common implement hereabouts – rested against the bench. This was not a local resident and clearly not a train passenger – for he did not have any kind of luggage.

The man looked too grave and too meditative to approach. The boys knew the Assistant Station Master Subir Ghosh who was, fortunately, in his office. After they conversed a little on how the examination went, Alak asked the ASM about the white-clad man. The ASM replied: "Oh, the sadhu! He has been coming here afternoons for several weeks. He sits on the bench from 4 pm to 6 pm punctually. He does not speak to anyone. If someone approaches him, he greets him amiably. But for me the strange thing is this: It seems that he is sitting there and eagerly absorbing all the sights and sounds of this dusty, grimy, sooty place. The way a tourist absorbs a new place. But something more. It is as though he

is absorbing the *reality* of this place.”

“I see. But Subir-kaka, why do you call him a sadhu?” asked Alak.

“Because of his attire and his demeanor. Just watch him walk with his long staff. He is different from other sadhus though, in the sense that he wears white instead of the usual gerua – or saffron – color of a holy man.”

“Subir-kaka, can you remember when he first appeared? Please try.”

“Let me see. He appeared a couple of days after I came back from my vacation in Sylhet. So that would be, what, just about two months ago.”

As they left the station, Tazamil and Prosenjit could not help noticing that a profound quietness had come over Alak. But they did not quiz him right then. They all went home.

Early next morning Alak made his way to the river landing in Haritikar. No, no one had seen Shujon Majhi lately. They were wondering too. One fishmonger said: “He came out of nowhere and disappeared into nowhere!”

Shujon Majhi was to return in two weeks. It was now two months. Alak recalled their last conversation.



For the troika this was to be a wonderful time in which they would make many short trips and day excursions by bicycle. This was the period in which they would go from being treated as adolescents to being regarded as adults.

But the moodiness of Alak put a damper on all this. Tazamil and Prosenjit allowed a few days to let him come back to his normal self. But this did not happen. So one day the three biked to Haritikar and sat near Barak, from where they could also see Surma and Kushiara. Tazamil broached the subject: “Alak, we are perplexed with the disappearance of Shujon Majhi as greatly as you are. But it seems now that the sadhu has become an additional obsession for you. Are the two connected? We cannot figure out what is going on with you. We wish you would explain.”

Alak now saw that he had been unfair to his friends. He now told them about the last conversation he had with Shujon Majhi. The two friends listened, but nothing became any clearer for them. So Prosenjit asked: “Well, all right. So Shujon Majhi may have got himself caught in a situation. No matter how strange or mysterious that situation is, we can discuss it. But what has it to do with the person in the station?”

“I think Shujon Majhi went to meet the sadhu and the sadhu returned in his place.”

Neither Tazamil nor Prosenjit was prepared for this. They were simply speechless. The boys never ridiculed one another. So the two did not think in that vein at all. Instead, they were wondering if what they had heard was what was actually meant by the speaker. At last Prosenjit managed to say: “Go on.”

“There is nothing concrete I can tell you. But there are three things I cannot get out of my mind. The first is a guilt feeling. That night on the roof terrace, I was the one who pressed Shujon-kaka on his real identity. That may have scared him away. The second is an image I have in my mind. When Shujon-kaka described the sadhu of the high Himalayas, I had formed – in my subconscious mind perhaps – a complete image of that white cloud-like sadhu. When I saw the man on the platform the two images matched exactly. Third, I was deeply struck by what Subir-kaka told us. The sadhu was soaking in the *reality* of it all. See, Subir-kaka has no background on anything that went on with Shujon Majhi. He was just expressing an isolated impression he developed, completely on his own. And what he was expressing was most significant in view of the background that we know.”

The two boys did not respond immediately. They all got up and started to walk to their bikes. Then Tazamil said: “Why don’t we go and talk to Nilotpol Babu? We will not give him any background, but just ask him a hypothetical question. At least we will have a fresh take on this subject.”

Nilotpol Babu was the science teacher of their school and a favorite teacher of the boys. He was most easy to talk to and entertained any subject at all – not just science. The idea of talking to him was well received by Alak who was looking for something, anything, to do about the situation. He agreed.



They arrived at the Teachers’ Common Room just minutes before the lunch hour. The idea was to corner the poor fellow alone just before all the teachers would leave for lunch. Nilotpol Babu of course understood the stratagem. But he liked the troika and did not mind this at all. He greeted them warmly: “Ah, here comes the threesome! How are you enjoying this vacation period before the results come out?”

The boys made appropriate replies and then got down to business. They said they had all just read the book *The Time Machine* and had developed a scenario that confounded them all. Then they posed the question which they had earlier composed with much deliberation: “Suppose that suddenly one day there appears in your town a person who actually has come from another time, and

has descended into your time. Suppose that he acts and speaks and looks like any normal person for this area and this era. Suppose that he does not want for you to know, or does not himself know, that he has come from another time. How would you determine if he is a time traveler?”

If Nilotpol Babu was amused by this problem he did not show any levity. He treated it as all the other questions the boys had put to him earlier. He began to answer, thinking even as he was speaking: “Well, let us examine this piece by piece. First, there is nothing outward about him that would lead you to any conclusions. That only leaves what is inside. Inside are his biological makeup and his mind. But if he is normal in every way, then I do not think that a medical examination will tell us anything. That leaves us his mind.

“So perhaps we could give him a test as to his knowledge of various historical events, assuming he agrees to such a test. Now, suppose he comes from the time of Emperor Ashok, and you ask him about a much later event of history. You ask him who the first Moghul Emperor was. If he correctly answers Babur, then it may mean that he is not a time traveler. Or it may mean that he has read up on, or in some other way picked up knowledge of eras later than his. So the test is inconclusive.

“If you continue this type of exercise, I think you will yourselves come to the conclusion that the problem you pose does not have a solution. There is no way to determine if this person is from another time. You can say he is not from another time just as you can say everybody is from another time.”

Nilotpol Babu stopped and looked at the intensely engaged faces of the boys. He then continued: “Well, why don’t you find out for yourselves? Each of you device a test and describe it to the other two. And the other two examine if this test will lead to a definite answer.”

This gave the boys something to do and also left the door open to various possibilities, for now. They thanked the teacher profusely and took their leave. The teacher hurried off to lunch. But he had an afterthought and turned and said: “Of course, not everything can fit into the world of science. There may be things beyond. The answer I gave you may not be the entire answer.”

When the troika gathered the very next day, each had formulated a test. But each was shot down by the other two, following the general principles the science teacher had described. Soon they came to agree with what he had said: This problem is not solvable. Tazamil and Prosenjit accepted this squarely. However, Alak’s moodiness continued. He somehow could not let go.

But he also realized that he had lost the enthusiastic support of the other two. So he started going to the station alone, in the late afternoon. Keeping his distance, he observed the seated sadhu as well as he could. He came early to see the sadhu walk in the afternoon light. Sure enough, the figure cast a shadow. One day he brought a small hand mirror. Sure enough, he could see the sadhu in the mirror. One day there were some other people sauntering near where the sadhu was seated. From a distance Alak shouted: “Shujon-kaka, O Shujon-kaka!” The sadhu turned his face towards him, but so did a few others. So that proved nothing. But now Alak had been seen, and his further spying on the sadhu had to be severely curtailed.

Already twice now, Anjoli-mashi had cornered Alak and asked him in a confidential voice if he knew anything about Shujon Majhi’s whereabouts. Alak sensed both anxiety and affection in her voice. This added another dimension to his obsession.

Tazamil and Prosenjit had another meeting on this. Prosenjit began by saying: “I think we have to do something further to help the situation. Not something to stop him, but something so he can run through a process himself and decide to stop himself, on his own terms. That’s the only way he is going to snap out of this.”

“I agree, but what?” asked Tazamil. “Short of Shujon-chacha suddenly turning up, I do not see what else can convince him that the sadhu is not Shujon-chacha’s stand-in.”

“What if this is not a matter of science? Remember what Nilotpol Babu said?” asked Prosenjit, rhetorically. “May be we should go to Silchar and consult the great Bipod-Taron Ojha.”

The ojha was well-known for performing all kinds of exorcisms. Tazamil smiled at this obviously facetious comment, but suddenly sat up straight. “Go to Silchar?! I think you’ve found the perfect answer!”

A surprised Prosenjit looked questioningly. Tazamil asked him: “Do you remember Alak telling us that he knew the Bagchi brothers of Silchar?”

“Indeed I do. Mr. Shome and Mr. Bagchi have some business dealings, and the two families have met.”

“So we will go to Silchar and consult the Bagchi brothers. That ought to satisfy Alak very fully, no matter how it ends.”

When the matter was put to Alak, he suddenly perked up: “Why didn’t I think of this?!” Immediately, a postcard was dispatched, proposing a social visit now

that the elder Bagchi brother as well as the troika had finished their Matriculation exam. A prompt reply came by return mail, with a warm invitation. The three were to have noon rice at the Bagchi home on the following Saturday, and they were not to purchase return tickets for the train. The Bagchi family vehicle would drive them back to Badarpur. The letter also suggested that the three take the first morning train so as to have a good chunk of time in Silchar. The younger Bagchi brother would skip school for this purpose, seeing as how it was a half-day school on Saturday. Not much was going to be lost by the absence.

5. KALO-DA THE LIBRARIAN

Even as the train was pulling into the station, the troika saw through the window the Bagchi brothers, Sayan and Deep, waiting on the platform. They alit and warm greetings were exchanged and introductions made. All then got into the Bagchi family car, a ‘staff car’, and headed home to Malugram.

The boys from Badarpur were most warmly received by the Bagchi household and pleasantries were exchanged over piping hot jilipis and shingaras accompanied by tea. After that Mrs. Bagchi asked if the boys all ate non-vegetarian food – especially fish and goat meat – and learned they did. Then the five boys were left to their own devices until lunch time which was still about three hours away. Sayan suggested they all take a sightseeing walk along the river embankment up to the Sadarghat ferry crossing. The troika saw the chance of having the long private conversation they came to have.

The Bagchi brothers did not express any surprise when Alak disclosed there was a hidden purpose to this visit. Sayan said in response: “We will find a place on the river bank to sit down. And then you can tell us.”

They found a cool grassy spot for all to sit down, roughly in a circle. Alak laid out the whole matter in as great detail as he could, occasionally checking a point with Tazamil and Prosenjit. Sayan kept his eyes fixed on the speaker’s face. Deep kept his eyes on the river – watching the car ferry load up and ply back and forth. It was almost as though he was not paying attention. Alak now finished with the part about the disappearance of Shujon Majhi and the appearance of the mysterious sadhu and also the consultation with the science teacher. He then offered these concluding remarks: “So you see, it is as though Shujon Majhi steps in and out of his own stories. Sometimes he lives in real life, sometimes he lives in stories. And this last time he stepped into a story and never came back. It seems as though a character from the story, this sadhu, came back instead.”

When he stopped, no one spoke for nearly a minute. Then Sayan looked at his younger brother and said: “Stories?”

“Stories,” the brother replied.

Sayan turned to Alak and said: “Tell us a couple of Shujon Majhi’s stories in as great detail as you can remember them, and in the sequence they were told. The oldest story first. Also tell us who all listened to these stories.”

Since Alak was all talked out, Prosenjit told the stories about the Punagiri

Man-eater and the Tibetan Yak-herder. Then Tazamil told the story of the Dark Rebel, remembering to preface it with the commotion that preceded that story, namely, the visit of the bride-viewing family from Karimganj. This incident was the only time Alak had seen the ever-unfazed Shujon Majhi discombobulated, and Tazamil thought that this fact was somehow significant.

All three boys from Badarpur were now exhausted, but happy that they had laid out their ‘case’ fully. The case was now submitted. However, all three noticed a strange phenomenon. The Bagchi brothers initially started listening with that very faint smile on their faces that was characteristic of them: a mixture of curiosity, interest and anticipation. But as the account progressed, both faces simultaneously began to look increasingly serious, and then grim. At length a somber Sayan said: “There’s a little tea shop just up the road. You can catch your breath and moisten your throats.”

The boys welcomed this because they knew the Bagchi brothers had decided to take up the case and would now barrage them with probing questions. They braced themselves to fill in any blanks in the account they had just collectively given. As each sipped his tea and felt revived, Alak resumed the thread of conversation: “I think we are ready to answer your questions. Hopefully, between the three of us, we can answer everything.”

Sayan replied, almost absent-mindedly: “Actually, I have only one question. So let Deep ask his questions first.” He looked at Deep who now spoke for the first time since they left home: “I too have just one question. Is Anjoli-mashi an attractive woman?”

In a manner that appeared to be choreographed, the mouths of the troika fell open simultaneously. They had heard that the Bagchi brothers were strange and mysterious, but now they were experiencing those facets first-hand. It was Tazamil who composed himself first and replied: “Anjoli-chachi is exceptionally beautiful. People in Badarpur rightly say she is the most beautiful woman in Badarpur. And what was your question, Sayan?”

“That was my question too,” replied Sayan.

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They finished their tea and were about to get up when Sayan signaled them to wait: “Please stay here a moment. I need to speak to my brother a minute.” The two brothers stepped outside the shop. When they came back in, Sayan asked the shopkeeper what time it was and then told the group: “Good, we still have about an hour and a half before lunch. Let’s start on our way back.”

When they were back on the street again, Sayan guided the group to the courthouse grounds which resembled the venue of a perpetual carnival. All types of vendors set up makeshift shops and peddled their wares with elaborate singsong oration and sometimes even poetry that they had themselves composed. The group found a shady spot under a tree out of everyone's earshot and sat down. "Before we proceed further there is something we all need to agree on," said Sayan. "We must agree to hold in the strictest confidence whatever is discussed among us. Nobody, absolutely nobody, outside of the five of us must know anything. This is necessary because we are dealing with an extremely dangerous situation, which I will explain to you presently. Can we agree on that? Please understand that we could also drop the whole matter now, and go home and enjoy a good meal."

The boys from Badarpur did not bargain on anything like this. They came to pursue an intriguing, but perfectly harmless, mystery. How could there be any danger, let alone extreme danger? Surely not the Morlocks from *The Time Machine*?! What was being asked of them in seeking such a promise? Alak in particular found this puzzling because he did not know the Bagchi brothers to be given to melodrama or exaggeration. But in the end all three boys seemed to reach a mental conclusion that dropping the matter was not an acceptable option at this point. Alak said: "I agree." Then Tazamil and Prosenjit nodded their agreement and also said so out loud.

"Good," said Sayan. "Now, I want to return by way of the Library and speak to Kalo-da the Librarian. But it is not a good idea for all of us to turn up there as if we were on a project. So here is what I suggest: One of you three come with me. The rest of you walk on ahead and wait for us in front of Abhoyacharan Pathshala. We will join you shortly."

Alak stayed with Sayan and the rest proceeded on their way. Sayan briefed Alak: "I will make some excuse and ask Kalo-da to let us see some old issues of a Calcutta newspaper from the archives. If he is able to do so, I will discreetly point to you a photograph. You can later tell me if you recognize the person."

Kalo-da, affable as always, was in his office. Sayan entered the office, as Alak busied himself looking at the mystery section of the library shelves. When, after exchanging amenities, Sayan explained to Kalo-da what he was trying to look up, Kalo-da said: "Sayan, you have not only come to just the right place, but also the right man. I remember taking a great deal of interest in that subject, as indeed most Bengalis did. I can find the articles you are referring to without any

difficulty at all.”

Kalo-da paused a moment and asked: “Why this sudden interest?”

Sayan replied without any hesitation: “My friend from Badarpur just read his Himalayan adventure book *Glaciers on High* and became interested in learning more about the author. But they only have a minimal public library there. So I thought I would try to help out.”

“This is certainly a most interesting person. An adventurer to the very core, I would say.”

“What does that mean, adventurer to the very core?”

“For most adventurers, hunting, exploring etc. are hobbies. But there are some few who live the adventure. This man gave up everything he worked for, everything he achieved, to pursue an insubstantial notion like love of the country. I do not think that was patriotism alone. It was the ultimate restless adventurer in him. Ulysses, the hero of Greek mythology, left behind his beautiful young wife to spend years on the high seas, engaging in great adventures and striving equally with men and gods.”

The library clerk was able to dig up the particular issues in about ten minutes. Sayan looked long at two photographs therein. One of these showed a hunter in a military-style outfit, wearing a pith helmet and standing over a dead tiger, posing with a rifle. The caption said:

The author standing over the slain tigress Baramdeo Man-eater, holding his prized Mannlicher-Schönauer rifle.

The other picture had the caption:

The author at the tip of land in Khartoum where Blue Nile and White Nile meet.

Sayan scanned the articles quickly to look for a particular photograph he had remembered from past reading. He found it. It had the caption:

The author with the famed big-game hunter Jim Corbett.

Of the three photographs, Sayan picked the Khartoum photograph where the face was the clearest. He lightly folded the newspaper so as to hide everything

but the photograph. He walked over to Alak and asked him to have a good look. Then he asked the clerk if the Library's copy of Jim Corbett's *Man-eaters of Kumaon* was on the shelves or checked out. It was on the shelves. Sayan opened it and looked at the map of Corbett's man-eater country intently. They both now thanked Kalo-da and the clerk and started on their way.

But Sayan remembered something and peeped into Kalo-da's office again: "Just one more question, seeing as how you specialized in World History. Was there an Egyptian pharaoh named Ridbanipal, or something that sounds close to it?"

"Something that sounds close to it. Ashurbanipal – quite prominent a pharaoh in fact." Kalo-da gave a smile and added: "I am sure there was no Ridbanipal. Where did you get *that*?! Sounds like someone is making fun of Governor Reid!"



"That was him," said a completely disconcerted Alak. "He has shaved off the military-style moustache and changed his hairstyle, grown stubble beard and got sun-burnt; but there is no mistaking that unusual face with sharp angles."

The two proceeded in silence to where the others would be waiting, each in his own thought. This being Saturday, school had let out at noon. The classrooms at Abhoyacharan Pathshala were empty. The group entered one of these rooms and sat down in a conference configuration. The boys from Badarpur expected an elaborate assessment of the situation from the Bagchi brothers and they were not to be disappointed. Sayan was the one who spoke.



"First, I want to say that the three of you have already done the groundwork. You suspected that something was not as it seemed, you did a lot of fact-checking with regard to the stories told and you analyzed the situation yourselves and discussed it with the science teacher. If you did not proceed further, it is because you are so close to the events. You do not have the detached and distant view that one sometimes needs to see the big picture. We, on the other hand, do.

"This is a mystery in two layers. The surface layer concerns the question: *Who* is Shujon Majhi? The underlying, much deeper layer concerns the question: *What* is the person who is Shujon Majhi? The first mystery is an entirely earthly phenomenon. The second mystery, however, must remain for now a mystery of an unknown nature.

“Now, it is improbable but not impossible for a boatman or a fishmonger to come upon exotic facts and weave stories around them. For example, he might name a little-known town in America or an exotic animal in Africa. How would he come upon such facts if he is illiterate and lives in a community of similar people? Well, he might have overheard the tourist passengers of his boat converse. He might have heard something on the radio in some tea shop. But the exotic facts we are dealing with here are most unusual and most diverse: A rare Austrian rifle; names of people in ancient Egypt and their meaning; the term ‘glacial moraine’ which I have seen only in the Geography textbook; and so on. I think it is certain that Shujon Majhi is not illiterate.

“The question then is whether he is a literate boatman, or a literate person masquerading as an illiterate boatman. We know this fact that instead of signing some form, he affixed his thumbprint. So clearly he is hiding the fact that he is literate. In other words, he is hiding his identity. His handwriting might give him away, but thumbprint is safe – for there is no way to trace down a thumbprint today. The most natural conclusion we can come to is that he is a fugitive from justice. So let us examine that angle and see if it gets us anywhere.

“If we take on face value your assessment that this is a decent human being, then he cannot be a bank robber or a murderer or anything like that. That leaves only one kind of fugitive from justice: A freedom-fighter, or as the British Government would call him, a terrorist. And as soon as I considered that possibility, all kinds of bells started to ring in my head. Shujon Majhi appeared in Badarpur about two years ago. That was exactly when the newspapers were rife with the most exciting account of one Subroto Majumdar, a very young, Cambridge-educated ICS officer in great favor with the British Government. He was a big-game hunter, a world traveler and a writer of stories of his adventures in the magazine section of the Sunday newspapers. And who among us has not read his Himalayan adventure book *Glaciers on High*? Subroto Majumdar was the quintessential native Saheb – one of those Indians who hung out with the British and imagined himself to be one of them.

“However, something happened. It happened when Subroto Majumdar was posted to Shillong as an Indian Civil Service officer and was serving as an advisor to the Governor of Assam, Robert Neil Reid. Majumdar met the great freedom-fighter Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and secretly became his adherent. There are no reports that he, Majumdar, committed any violent acts. He secretly helped the freedom movement with logistics and materiel, using his official

position. But before long the British Intelligence was on to him. Majumdar went into hiding just in the nick of time. He simply disappeared.

“The connection I made between him and Shujon Majhi was of course a speculation. But when I showed Alak a picture of Subroto Majumdar, he confirmed that that was Shujon Majhi. So the speculation paid off.

“Now you can see the great danger involved. If we inadvertently let slip that we found Subroto Majumdar, they would hunt him down and hang him. From what you have told me, my sense is that even in hiding, Shujon Majhi has remained connected to the movement. This is why he disappears for two weeks at a time. He goes to commiserate with his cohort. So his execution would result in further hostilities that may easily get out of hand. A terrorist upheaval in Bengal now could easily derail or delay the departure of the British from India. So what you have stumbled upon in your placid little town can affect the course of human history.”

Sayan stopped and looked at the listeners, signaling that the floor was open.

“So all these stories – they were not tall tales after all?!” asked Prosenjit.

Sayan replied: “No. They were based on true adventures he undertook. He changed things around and embellished them, but in many respects he stayed surprisingly, riskily even, close to his real life. The Punagiri Man-eater in real life was Baramdeo Man-eater that he had actually slain. Punagiri is a village just across the river from Baramdeo.”

Tazamil asked: “And about his friendship with Jim Corbett. Was that made up?”

“It turns out that he knew Jim Corbett very well.”

“But how could a city-bred person instantly become a rural boatman and a fishmonger – both with facility?” asked Alak.

“Very easily. See, he was a fine yachtsman in Cambridge. And like Jim Corbett, he hunted game as well as large fish. One time he spent many days trying to catch a particular Mahasir in a stream in Kumaon. And he was born in Sylhet. So he could speak the local Bengali dialect in Badarpur. The part of Shujon Majhi the boatman-fishmonger was tailor-made for Subroto Majumdar, ICS.”

6. IMAM HIKMATULLAH

At this point, the school custodian appeared, telling them he needed to lock up the classrooms. As the five vacated the room Sayan said: “Let’s do a little sightseeing on the way back as well. Let’s return by way of Itkhola so you can visit the Idga, the masjid.”

The Badarpur troika were still absorbing Sayan’s lengthy explanation. They were too intelligent to immediately start asking questions or casting doubt. But the more they thought and the more they compared the explanation with their intimate knowledge of the ‘facts on the ground’, the more things fell in place. Still and all, questions were crisscrossing their minds and their brains. At length Tazamil tried to verbalize one issue: “About Anjoli-chachi...”

“Let Deep address that issue,” said Sayan as he looked at his brother. At this point they were cutting diagonally across a large, grass-covered field to reach Itkhola. The Badarpur boys drew up close to Deep as they all walked. Sayan fell back a few steps.

“There is a little more to be read from the account you have given us,” said Deep, “over and beyond what Dada just explained. Clearly, this man’s main motivation was to hide his identity and blend in as a local fisherman. That being the case, it seems to me that he was taking too many chances with his stories; he was going too far out on a limb. His stories were needlessly skirting too close to his real life. Take the case of the rifle. He got carried away and wanted to tell you about it – his pride and joy in real life. But he also wanted to play it safe. So he mispronounced its name and gave the wrong country of origin. He was always going too far and then pulling back a little. It is almost as though he had a need to show off, to brag. But what would be the pleasure of bragging to a group of high school boys and children? Why would an obviously intelligent man take such risks?

“Once you formulate your question this way, the answer becomes obvious. When is the only time and where is the only place an intelligent man, a man who has held positions of grave responsibility, acts in silly ways?”

Deep left the question hanging in the air for a few seconds to see if anyone wanted to take it. Tazamil did: “When he falls in love and where he is with his love.”

The boys from Badarpur stopped walking. This needed to be absorbed properly. Alak followed Tazamil: “He was playing up to Anjoli-mashi?”

“That was my initial theory,” said Deep, “but it still remained to be confirmed. And complete confirmation came when you told us the story of the Dark Rebel.”

Prosenjit, who was silent all this time, joined: “I think I’ve got it. From the very beginning, he fell for the exceptionally beautiful Anjoli-mashi. Even though they never spoke, he was constantly trying to impress her. It must have worked, because she was almost always showing up for the storytelling sessions. So while Shujon-kaka was *telling us* stories, he was also *speaking to* Anjoli-mashi.”

“And when he came on that Saturday and heard about showing Anjoli-mashi to a prospective bridegroom,” continued Alak, “he became completely discombobulated. He felt his love was slipping out of his hand.”

“Right. And, breaking his routine, he hurried back the following day,” Deep picked up, “with the Egypt story. While for all of you it was a most exotic and engrossing story, for Anjoli-mashi it was a direct offer of love and a marriage proposal. He understood that no matter how broadminded she was and no matter how much she loved him – if she did – she could never marry a majhi. He was therefore telling her in so many words that he really was not an ‘ordinary’ majhi, but a high government official in hiding. He was asking her to wait for him. He was telling her how very beautiful she was. All this without their ever speaking to each other! And indeed, Anjoli-mashi rejected that Karimganj bridegroom the very next day.”

“And just in case Anjoli-mashi had any doubts about the message, the pharaoh Ridbanipal pointed directly to Governor Reid,” said Alak.

They had now arrived at the masjid. “So then,” said Sayan, “the first layer mystery is quite clear now. Let us see what we can do about the deeper layer.”

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Nobody knew if the head cleric of the Itkhola masjid, Imam Hikmatullah, was officially entitled to be called Imam but everyone addressed him thus. He was widely liked. He did not have the appearance that people normally associated with a high cleric: long beard, white cotton cap, an ascetic bearing, a grave face; a man who is economic with words, and even humorless. Instead, the Imam was a rotund, jovial man with an ever-ready smile. He was also easy of speech and made people completely comfortable in his presence.

As the five approached the masjid, they saw the Imam standing near the low concrete wall that separated the mosque grounds from the Itkhola Road. He knew the Bagchi brothers and their reputation. As he saw them approaching, he

said: “Ah the amazing Bagchi boys! With some new friends, I see.”

All the five boys did the customary obeisance to the Imam, first touching the forehead with fingers of the right hand, then touching the breast with the same fingers. “Adab, Imam,” said Sayan, “these are our friends visiting from Badarpur. We thought we would show off the masjid.”

“Welcome, welcome! Please come on in, boys. Go to the building and show your guests the Prayer Hall.”

“Thank you, Imam, we will,” said Sayan. “But if you can spare us a few minutes, we wanted to ask you something.”

“Ask.”

“Imam, we have all read a science fiction story called *The Time Machine* about people traveling through time – from the present to the past or to the future. That made us puzzle over this scenario: What if there stands among us – in flesh and blood just like any of us – a man who has come from the past or the future? I do not mean a ghost or an apparition. I mean an actual person who may not know himself that he is from another time. We have gathered that science does not allow this scenario. But what about the religions?”

The Imam was used to getting all types of questions, and very little fazed him. This one gave him pause. It was clear from the curve of his eyebrows that he was now thinking. And perhaps composing his answer at the same time. He then spoke slowly: “If you are asking in general about phenomena beyond the realm of science, I would say that many religions – in one form or another – allow such phenomena. Miracles, rebirth, reincarnation etc. are examples. But what you are asking about specifically – a person ceasing to exist in his era and reappearing in another era that is before his or after his – is not something the religions have considered. At least not to my knowledge. So my answer would be that the religions have nothing to say on this.”

Sayan did not respond, for he sensed that the Imam was not finished with his thought process. Indeed, the latter started to speak again: “But as a private person I will add this: If such a visitation were ever to be revealed to anyone, it would be strictly a private, one-man experience. It would not be provable to others. What I mean is this: If you, Sayan, witness a person of flesh and blood suddenly materialize before you, you must hold it as a private gift to you and be enriched by the experience within yourself. You may also choose to not believe it. But you may not convince others of it. As soon as you try to share the experience the gift will lose its value. It will become a matter of amusement or

ridicule. So it seems to me that this is not a matter that is discussible. Or more to the point, discussing diminishes its value. But I am not answering your question, am I?"

"On the contrary, you have answered my question very fully, Imam. Thank you."

7. OCHIN THAKUR

The lunch menu was as elaborate as a wedding feast – course after course appearing in well-choreographed sequence. Mrs. Bagchi clearly went all the way for her out-of-town young guests. Mr. Bagchi sat at the dining table with the five young men while Mrs. Bagchi supervised the serving of the meal. It started with eggplant halves fried in batter, to be eaten with a dollop of Basmati rice, upon smearing it with pure cow-milk ghee and a dash of salt. A long, thin and green chili pepper was placed in the plate as zest for this mouthful. Tiny lengths of the chili had to be periodically bitten off. So delicious was this course that one was tempted to make a whole meal out of it. However, every food-loving Bengali knew not to make that natural mistake, but to carefully pace things out all the way to the dessert.

As the meal progressed now, the hostess was rewarded by constant appreciative comments from the guests and uncharacteristically, even from her own two boys. Mr. Bagchi kept up a lively conversation with the boys all through the proceedings.

The meal ended with sweet yogurt, topped with a local variety of Gulab Jamun called Lalmohon – made by the famed Bandhob Mistanno Bhandar. After that the boys found themselves again left to their own devices, but each greatly inclined to have a little nap. The sofas and the carpet in the living room made for a cozy setting for short naps. Sayan suggested that the visitors go ahead and have an hour-long nap while the driver finished eating the fine meal to which he too had been invited. Then they would make an early start for Badarpur, for there was much more to do that day before the light failed. Sayan and Deep did not nap, but instead held a private planning session.

An hour later a quick round of strong tea was provided to awaken the sleepy guests. Now Sayan disclosed the plan: “Deep and I will come with you to Badarpur. We can talk in the car. Our driver is completely trustworthy, but even so, we shall say nothing about Shujon Majhi. We will talk only about the sadhu.”

As the car reached the end of Trunk Road, Sayan said: “Pull up at the Annapurna Temple. Our guests will have a quick look.”

The temple door was open. As they stepped inside the cool, serene hall smelling of flowers and frankincense, they saw that the head priest, Ochin Thakur, was tending to the flower arrangements for the altar. The priest of course knew the Bagchi brothers and greeted them warmly.

After taking the dust of Ochin Thakur's feet and exchanging pleasantries, Sayan said: "Thakur-moshai, we would like to ask you a question." He then posed the same question to the priest that he had posed to the Imam. Ochin Thakur was a rather reserved person whose countenance bore great gravitas. No one but the Bagchi brothers would have dared ask him such a question. But when the Bagchi brothers asked a question, everyone tried to rise to the occasion. It was generally considered a privilege.

Rather than answering the exact question that was asked of him, Ochin Thakur offered a philosophical discourse. "Being born on this Earth is like being on a tour. It is up to you to choose what kind of tour you wish to take. If you want to view life through the dictates of science, you can stay inside your safe and comfortable motor coach and look out. If you want to free yourself from the dictates of science, you can get out of the coach, feel the soil underfoot, the wind in your face and the nature sounds in your ears.

"This tour has so many things to offer, but what you receive depends on how receptive you are, how you have opened yourself up to all that is trying to flow into you. This is why some sadhus retire alone to the Himalayas. They discard all artificial precepts like logic and reason, spread their hands and say: 'Here I am. Unconditionally open to every experience.' Then most unusual experiences flow in that only they get to know. We do not. We cannot."

At the temple here as well as at the masjid earlier, the boys from Badarpur listened with rapt attention to the conversation. They neither commented nor reacted. They were quite overwhelmed by how the day was progressing. They came here with a mystery that was a seeming hodgepodge of real life and supernatural phenomena. They did not even know if the Bagchi brothers would consider this a worthy mystery. But throughout the day they saw their mystery brought to increasing focus, separated into its real life part and the supernatural part – both examined with equal seriousness. By now the guests had gone completely into an observing-and-listening mode. But Tazamil, who secretly aspired to be a famous biologist, could contain himself no longer and put a question to Ochin Thakur: "Thakur-moshai, are you saying that these Himalayan sadhus can see farther than the scientists?"

"No. I would not make that comparison. But I would not shy away from this issue either. Perhaps a good way to put this would be that the scientist observes the near and the sadhu sees the far. And of course when I say near and far, I do not use the words literally. The question is: Do you have to transcend the near

to see the far or can you see the far directly? Why don't you think about that?"

"I will. But Thakur-moshai, is there any overlap between the two – the two paths, I mean?"

"I know what you are asking. The answer is: The spiritually empowered scientist is a better scientist."

They took leave of the priest and were on their way. As the car now crossed the railroad tracks at the Level Crossing and reached the open highway, Prosenjit carefully formulated and posed a question: "Sayan, these conversations you are having with the holy men are indeed most interesting. They are just for your own curiosity, right?"

Sayan understood the thrust of the question. He replied: "In part, yes. But I am also trying to get a handle on our second-layer problem. If it is in some realm that is out of science, then it has to be understood in its own realm. So it helps to talk to people who are used to the realms outside of science. We will blend the solid logic we learned from the science teacher and the philosophies we learned from the two holy men, and try to do something tangible with that combined, broad perspective.

"So let me get to our plan this afternoon. When we arrive in Badarpur you will let Deep and me off near the railroad station and go on home. We do not want to be seen in your company by the sadhu. He already knows Alak by face and probably the other two of you as well. We will find the sadhu at the platform and have a conversation with him. So send the car back for us to the station in about half an hour. We would then like to come and say hello to Alak's parents and also meet Anjoli-mashi."

A puzzled Prosenjit could not contain himself: "But Sayan, as the science teacher told us, we cannot elicit any clues as to his origin by simply talking to him!"

"The science teacher is absolutely right. But the most helpful thing he said, I think, was that you had to probe his mind. So that is what we will try to do. We will try to have an inner conversation."

"What is an inner conversation?"

"Well, here's what I am thinking. If the sadhu and Shujon Majhi are connected in some deep, distant way, then maybe there is a common core at some level that we can tap into. May be we can have an ordinary conversation which elicits from the very deep of the sadhu's consciousness that river theme that seems to be so deeply seated in Shujon Majhi. Let us see how it goes."

8. KOLYAN HO!

The station platform was a very busy place, even when there was no arrival or departure activity. There were always some passengers waiting at any given time, with their luggage neatly piled up. There were people hanging out in front of the A. H. Wheeler Bookstore and the tea kiosk and the paan-biri-cigarette shop. There were coolies having a nap right there on the platform floor, in between the arrival and departure rush periods. Everywhere there was the regular dust and grime and on top of this, there was a thin layer of coal dust. Everything looked old and unclean and worn from use. The ever-present smell was a mixture of the smell of burning coal and of frying samosas. So it was a sharp contrast to look down the platform and see, clear at the desolate far end, under a shade tree, a figure seated on the wooden bench who did not fit this ambiance at all. His spotless white attire, snow white flowing hair and beard – all seemed so very out of place. He sat very still as if in meditation, but with eyes open, looking at nothing in particular. His hair and beard did not seem to have a sharp outline but to blend smoothly into the air.

Sayan now had such an eerie feeling as he had never known. Suddenly he felt sapped of vigor. He felt weak both of mind and in the knees. He said to Deep in a low voice: “Deep, I feel a little strange. This station – there could be no place that is more real, more steel and concrete, more lived in. And in this setting we have this sadhu who looks most out-of-place and most unreal. What if he really and truly is from – you know – another time?”

“I know this feeling,” replied Deep. “But let’s take this matter in our stride as we always have.”

That simple sentence revived Sayan completely. They now approached the sadhu with unhesitating movement. When they were within a few feet, the man turned his head and looked at them. The brothers saw a soothing visage with kindly eyes. Sayan said effortlessly: “Maharaj, you must be new here. We have not seen you before,” and bent down to touch his feet. Deep did the same. The sadhu greeted them silently with joined palms. Then he said in Hindi: “Kolyan ho – may all that is good befall you!”

Sayan switched from Bengali to Hindi and introduced Deep and himself: “I am Sayantan. This is my brother Sayandeep. We actually live in Silchar, but we often come to Badarpur to see family and friends. So we are quite familiar with this station and this area.”

“Two beautiful names,” said the sadhu.

Now Deep spoke: “As soon as we saw you we came over to speak to you. We are drawn to holy men, as one of our relatives is a monk of the Ramakrishna Mission.”

The sadhu replied, maintaining the amiable smile on his face: “I have great respect for the monks of the Ramakrishna Mission.” Even as he said that, Sayan was trying to figure out what strategy his brother was following, as they had never discussed among themselves what they would do when they actually came face to face with the sadhu. Now they had.

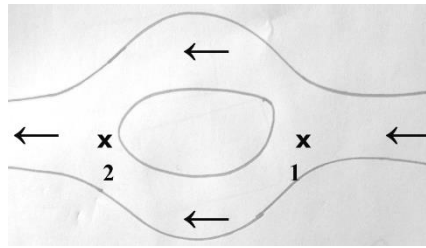
Deep continued the conversation in that manner his which put the other side completely at ease: “This monk often tells us stories of lone holy men from far and wide – up on the high Himalayas beyond Manasarovar or down by the Ganges in Varanasi. But one thing common in all these stories is that when you meet such a man, you are allowed to ask one question – just *one* question. And the holy man will give you the best and the sincerest answer he has found through his holy journey. Is this also true with you, Maharaj?”

The sadhu’s smile widened a little as if in amused curiosity. He said: “I would not have thought a young man like you would have a question for an itinerant sannyasi. But please go ahead and ask.”

“Maharaj, my brother and I have talked much about our relative the monk whom we love very much. And that led us to wonder, at the very core of the core, in the very essence, what the difference is between an unfettered monastic or spiritual pursuit and the pursuit of a homebound, everyday man?”

As the question developed, the sadhu’s smile was slowly replaced by a thoughtful and serious countenance. He thought for a while. Then his smile came back. He replied: “There are many stock answers to that. But you have honored me by asking a most sincere question, not a flippant or stock question but one born of your own thinking. So I will give you my most sincere answer. But first, please sit down.”

The sadhu moved to the center of the bench so that the two brothers could sit on either side of him. As they did, both had a strange but warm feeling of being in a good, safe place – the way they felt in younger days when, climbing under the same comforter with their grandfather on a cold evening, they listened to hair-raising stories.



The sadhu took his walking staff and with the point of it, drew a sketch on the concrete platform. There was a thin layer of soot and dust and thus faint lines were discernible. As he drew he spoke: “What I am drawing here is an island in a river. The arrows show the flow of the river, from right to left. Now as you can see, there are two nodes in this diagram, node 1 at the conjunction of three streams in the back of the island, and node 2 in the front.

“Node 1 is where the homebound man stands. Before him, there is a choice: Take the right turn or take the left turn. The life of a homebound man is a continuous set of choices and that is why he can never see the future. The island blocks his view.

“The person who has left everything behind – who has severed all bonds of family love and all encumbrances of the society – stands at node 2. He has no more choices to make. The choosing is behind him. He can see the future.”

The sadhu stopped and looked at the two brothers listening closely. After a brief silence the sadhu smiled slightly mischievously and said: “Now, permit *me* to ask *you* one question!”

“Please ask,” said Deep.

“What is the essence of this island?”

Sayan looked at Deep, signaling that he was yielding the floor. Deep drew a faint dashed line on the platform with his index finger – a line perpendicular to the river and cutting the island in half. Then he said: “If I now separate the two halves, we have two very familiar pictures: a river splitting into two and two rivers joining to form one river. So you can combine two everyday concepts to find something completely new: the island. The spiritual man has found the island and has circumnavigated it.”

As Deep was speaking, hunched down on the diagram on the floor and the sadhu was also looking at the diagram, Sayan was observing the sadhu’s face intently. He thought he saw a reaction – a very faint one – like that of a person who was suddenly searching his own memory upon hearing something. Then he saw the sadhu look at Deep with great amazement and great admiration in

his eyes.

As Sayan was contemplating if, and how, any further information could be elicited from today's session, the sadhu spoke, as if unknowingly picking up Sayan's chain of thought: "Your relative the monk tells you fine stories about lone holy men. If you have a little time, would you like to hear such a story from me?"

The two brothers responded most enthusiastically and even moved in a little closer to the sadhu. The latter said: "This story happens to be about a lone monk, from the Buddhist lore."



The Tale of the Statue of the Buddha

This is a story of the power of faith. An old Buddhist monk resolved to carry a statue of the Buddha a great distance through the woods, to install it in a far monastery. This was to be his last act of personal devotion to the Buddha before he would begin his preparation for death. In planning this project he paid no attention to the fact that he was very old and extremely frail. Also, the statue was quite large – much larger than the monk in fact. It was carved from a single piece of quarried stone block. Naturally, it was an impossible task for him but he did it anyway.

The story goes that from sunup to sundown the monk dragged the statue by fits and starts – a few inches at a time. Then he rested a bit and started again. He would not let any bystanders and watchers who gathered round to help him, because that would defeat the whole intent of the project.

After sundown everyday he found a place under a large tree in the forest to spend the night. All the spectators went home. When they returned next morning, they found that the monk had had a very early start and had moved on. They were immensely surprised to learn that in this early period in the morning the monk had covered a great distance already – much longer distance than he covered during the entire day. Only because of these fast legs of the journey, the statue of the Buddha was soon installed at the destination.

The story goes that at night, when no one was looking, the statue carried the monk great distances.

The story ends here, with a strong period. The monk died a peaceful death

and the statue stood as a refrain of the monk. People started worshipping the statue as a most potent deity.



After this the brothers gradually brought the conversation to a smooth conclusion. They promised they would look up the sadhu the next time they were in Badarpur Station. As they parted most cordially, Sayan noticed that the sadhu continued to look at his brother with intense curiosity evident in his kindly eyes, now shining brightly in the soft, waning light of the late afternoon. As he saw Sayan looking back at him, the sadhu raised his right hand in blessing and said: “Kolyan ho!”

The car had not yet arrived for them. But this gave the brothers the privacy to discuss the further course of events. First, Deep asked: “The sadhu is on to us?”

“Yes, I think so. With that statue story what he was really telling us is that Shujon Majhi is the frail Buddhist monk. Shujon Majhi is the one who initially gave the sadhu any reality. The sadhu is the statue. But he has taken over now as the prime mover. He represents the current reality. He was telling us that we should accept this.”

“So do we really want to execute our plan?”

“Deep, I have trouble with that question if we look at it emotionally or sentimentally. But the only real issue here is that one person who had every right and reason to be here is missing. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” said Deep. “But it has to be cleared with *her*.”

“Leave it to me.”

9. THE HOUSE OF THREE BANYANS

At the Shome household the troika were sitting on the stoop, waiting for them. Sayan told them that before going into the house, they needed to have a quick conference. The five then went into the orchard in the grounds of the house. Sayan laid out his plan.

“Alak, we would like to come back next Saturday and spend the night in your home. Even though I am off, Deep has class until noon. We will take the next train out and arrive in Badarpur Station about 4:30 pm. We will meet with the sadhu, hoping he will be there. If not, we will go to his place on some excuse and meet him.

“Now, I want you boys to find out where he lives. This should not be difficult. You may follow him home discreetly; you may ask around; or you may ask a friend whom the sadhu has not seen before to follow him closely home.

“After we have met with the sadhu, we will walk to your place. Do not come to the station for us. Also, when we say we will spend the night, what we really mean is that this will be a night of vigil. You must work out a plan how we can sneak out at night. Is all this doable?”

“Absolutely,” said Alak.

“Can you have ready enough bicycles for all of us?”

“Consider it done.”

As they spoke and walked round the house, the Bagchi brothers noticed three in-ground plant enclosures made of circular red-brick wall and filled in with soil. In each was planted a sapling about two feet tall. Sayan asked Alak about these. “These are the three banyans – of the Ashwatha variety,” said Alak. “Anjoli-mashi had them planted. She had the three plants placed just so the trees – when fully grown – will make the house cool and shady but not dark. And she thinks this house will one day come to be known as the House of Three Banyans!” Upon this Sayan made an aside remark to Deep: “The number Three again.”

The Bagchi brothers were accorded a most warm welcome, accompanied by elaborate afternoon tea and snacks. The entire regular “story circle” had turned up. As all sat in the living room with Mr. and Mrs. Shome, there entered through the door a young woman who was so beautiful that she seemed almost unreal: a vision or an apparition. Even as she was entering the room, she looked at Sayan and Deep and smiled easily, saying: “Our guests ... Sunset and Evening Star!”

The brothers had been addressed thus before, with that first line of Tennyson's poem *Crossing the Bar*. For, Sayantan meant the sunset hour and Sayandeep meant the votive evening lamp. They now felt that the great beauty was matched by unusual refinement. As she addressed them, they instinctively rose from the sofa. At that, the apparition looked at her sister, Mrs. Shome, and spoke in deeply resonant, rich voice: "Didi, such well-mannered young men! Now I know why Alak raves so much about the Bagchi brothers."

Anjoli-mashi sat down at the two-person sofa and, as if by force of habit, Urmi, Urvi and Mila moved to sit at her feet on the floor, touching her legs. Deep tried hard to recall from memory something about a mother and three babies – in connection with this very 'case.'

Sayan was at an age to be smitten, even by someone older than him. As if to allow him time to recover his speech, Deep started an easy dialogue with Anjoli-mashi. The subject ranged widely from the newest detective mystery books to the Big Top circus coming to Silchar. Eventually Sayan joined in, somewhat awkward of speech. But he regained his composure when little Urmi piped up: "Sayan-da, please tell us a story. You must tell us a story. We haven't heard a story since Shujon-kaka, our regular storyteller, left us and never came back. He never even said goodbye. And we thought he liked us!"

Sayan saw here the chance of accomplishing that which he wanted to accomplish, but thus far had no idea how. So he rose to the occasion: "Well, Urmi, I am not much of a storyteller. But I can do better for you. I can wave my magic wand and bring your regular storyteller back."

"Oh do! Please, please, please do it now. Bring him back now."

"Actually, I left my magic wand in Silchar. So you'll have to wait until I come back next Saturday. But there is a small problem. I just heard your Shujon-kaka whisper in my ear a question: 'What do I have to look forward to if I come back?' Well, does he have something to look forward to?"

"Please tell him we all love him," said Urmi.

"Have you yourself told him this before?"

"No. And I am now sorry for that."

"Will you tell him that you love him if he comes back?"

"I will not miss a chance."

As the two brothers were getting to the car, the whole group came out to say goodbye. In the great mingling of everyone trying to say goodbye to the two brothers, Anjoli-mashi managed to get right close to Sayan. As he felt her sweet,

warm breath on his face, she whispered in his ear: “What Urmi said goes for me as well.”

It was getting dark as the car raced towards Silchar. The two brothers usually spoke freely in presence of the driver because they trusted him and because he did not seem to have any interest in what they said unless it concerned sports. In the dark that was now gathering within the car, Sayan turned to his younger brother and said, almost as though he were thinking out loud: “You probably sensed that I was a little awkward. I know you will tease me, saying I am smitten. But that is not it. When I looked into the eyes of Anjoli-mashi, I thought I saw far places. I thought I saw at different times green forests, mist rivers, moon mountains and vast ice flats. I know this is a product of an overactive imagination, but that is what I think I saw.”

Deep spoke slowly, his voice too was disengaged. He was not speaking, but expressing feelings. “Dada, if you go Ochin Thakur’s way, then you know what you saw is real. Only, I think that it is not that *you saw* something. It is rather that *you were shown* something. The Far showed itself to you. You are blessed among men.”

10. TWILIGHT AND EVENING BELLS

At around 4:30 pm next Saturday the brothers alit at Badarpur Junction. Immediately they looked at the bench at the far end of the platform and saw that it was empty. They looked up and down the platform and also at the far platforms, but there was no sign of the sadhu. No matter. He probably would be late today. The brothers decided to have samosa and tea and bide time this way. From where they stood, they could keep an eye on the bench. As luck would have it, after only a few minutes, they saw the sadhu enter the platform and proceed to the bench. The brothers did not want to let on that they had been waiting for the sadhu. So they killed some more time at the Bookstore and then walked towards the bench.

“The two illustrious brothers again! Kolyan ho!”

The brothers touched his feet and sat down. Sayan began: “Maharaj, this time we came to see our aunt who lives in Badarpur and is about to be married off. So we thought as long as we were here we would come around and pay you a visit.”

“I am glad of it. So you have come to attend the wedding?”

“Well, not quite yet. It is a little complicated. You see, my aunt Anjoli-mashi was deeply in love with a person whom she thought she could not marry because of unequal social standing. The man is a fishmonger and a ferryman. But her inability to accept him caused the man deep agony and finally he upped and left. Just disappeared, and never came back. My aunt was heartbroken. But eventually, only to save her family great heartache, she agreed to consider an arranged marriage. There is already a prospective groom lined up and the deal will be finalized on Monday. After that, there is no looking back. She will have given herself to another man, even if most reluctantly. We love our aunt very much and we wanted to be near her at this difficult juncture.”

As Sayan spoke, Deep kept a close watch on the sadhu’s face. But he could not see any reaction. Then the sadhu smiled and showed them the palm of his right hand. “Haath ki rekhayen – you cannot go against these scrolls on your palm. Whatever is written here is what will happen.”

Deep took up the conversation. “We were just saying among ourselves that even if Shujon Majhi, the fishmonger who calls himself the Rower of Three Rivers, turns up tomorrow, the wedding can still be staved off. But there is no chance of that happening at all. We have no way of contacting him. Right at this

moment, he could be up on the Himalayas or down by the Nile, for all we know.”

“Ah, but there is a problem here. You do not know that even if he turned up, your aunt will shake off the insurmountable strictures of the society and accept him with open arms in public, do you? Just think: A high-born woman of high refinement and a lowly fishmonger! How the tongues will wag!”

The brothers quickly looked at each other, trying to decide who should speak. Sayan gave a nod and Deep spoke: “That’s the very point Anjoli-mashi raised with us, in confidence. She said: If he does come back again I will embrace him in public, society or no society.”

The sadhu seemed deep in thought. At length the brothers got up to take leave, Sayan saying: “Goodbye for now, Maharaj.”

The sadhu looked at them with most sad eyes: “You mean goodbye for eternity, don’t you?”

“Maharaj, please forgive us.”

“No, there is nothing to forgive. It is the right thing what you do. Now is time for twilight and evening bells. Kolyan ho!”

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From the station to the Shome house was about a kilometer. The Bagchi brothers looked forward to this interesting walk along the crowded, shop-lined streets and banyan-shaded lanes, to a warm reception they knew waited at the end. They used this time to discuss what just went on. First, Sayan asked: “Do you think we have been able to set things in motion?”

“I do think so.”

“Based on what?”

“There was nothing we told the sadhu that could have led him to conclude that Anjoli-mashi was *refined*. To me that gave away that he was engaged with us at the deeper level of conversation.”

“My thinking exactly. And one more thing. I do not know why that Tennyson poem keeps popping up, you know, *Crossing the bar*. Shujon Majhi had Tanafriti of ancient Egypt mention sunset and evening star. Anjoli-mashi referred to us as such. And then the sadhu spoke of twilight and evening bell. I remembered this stanza from that poem:

*Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;*

The interesting thing about this, though, is that that poem cannot be more than about fifty years old.”

“I see. Well, ‘twilight and evening bell’ is a most natural combination to think of. So maybe this is just a coincidence. But even as all things are falling in place, there is one point that continues to puzzle me. If this is such a great story of love, why did Shujon Majhi disappear just when he knew that things were looking up between him and Anjoli-mashi?”

“Ulysses,” said Sayan cryptically. Then he related the conversation he had with Kalo-da the Librarian.



The troika were sitting on the stoop. They walked forward to meet the brothers. Prosenjit lost no time in reporting that they had found the sadhu’s lodgings. “There is something of an abandoned temple complex in Haritikar. It still has some rooms that are livable and itinerant ascetics do sometimes live there. That is where the sadhu has taken up his lodgings. He takes the bus back and forth between Haritikar and Badarpur, and that explains the punctuality of his turning up at the station.”

“Describe the place as well as you can,” said Sayan, “giving us the lay of the land, as it were.”

“Well, the temple is right on the river. It backs into a ghat, a set of rustic stairs that descend into the water. A small dinghy is kept tied there. In front of the temple is a paved courtyard and on either side of this courtyard is a row of rooms. These are the lodgings I spoke of. The entire complex is within a wooded area and not visible from the main highway.”

“Where does the temple stand in relation to the fork in the river?”

“It is right at the fork.”

“Good. And Alak, have you set up a cover story for our vigil this night?”

“Not to worry. I said that the five of us wanted to appreciate the beauty of the river at night. These being warm nights, we have told the family that we will sleep on the roof terrace when we come back. So as soon as the little brats have gone to bed, no one will be watching us. We can leave whenever we want and come back whenever we want.”

Presently Urmi and the gang turned up to see the magic wand. Sayan explained: “Of course you cannot see it! That’s why it is called a magic wand. But wait and see what happens.”

The whole group now went into the house and found the afternoon tea ready, with a wide variety of snacks, served personally by Anjoli-mashi. She was dressed in a simple cotton sari, with its spare end tied around her waist, maid-like. That somehow made her look even more attractive, even more refined. As she handed Sayan his plate of pakoras with tamarind sauce and chili paste, she asked: “So will you be gallantly waving your magic wand tonight, Sayantan?”

Sayan was glad of being showered with so many words at one time by the goddess and also of being addressed so endearingly by his full name. He managed these words: “My wand. Your magic.”

There was now ample time before the call to dinner. So the five boys went on to the roof terrace, upon managing to give Urmi and the gang the slip. The troika had been dying of curiosity as to what game was afoot later that night. So now they asked straight out. Deep took the question.

“The science teacher was right. There are no tests you can give to the sadhu to determine who or what he is. You have already confirmed that by reasoning among yourselves. But when all tests have been considered and dismissed, there still remains one final test. It is what is called in our chemistry lab a destructive test. That is, you *can* find out what a piece of material is, but in the process of finding out you destroy it.

“In this case you suspect that something has happened, but you have no way of proving that it has happened. So we will make it *unhappen*, and observe it as it unhappens.”

Out of a speechless troika, it was Prosenjit who first managed to speak: “You mean...?”

“That’s right. We will try to exchange the sadhu for Shujon Majhi. How will we do it? Well, we have set certain things in motion and we are hoping that this transference will occur tonight. That is why we will go to the old temple after dinner and keep watch.”

When Deep finished Sayan took up the thread: “Now, of course, we should consider if it is right to try to do this. It is not a crime in any sense and it does not come under any prescriptions of right-and-wrong. Still and all, my brother and I both feel a certain sense of sadness in making the sadhu depart. But in the end we figure that this is Shujon Majhi’s time, and so he is the one who should be here. That is, if all our assumptions are correct and if what we think will happen does happen. If not, then no harm done. Nothing will happen tonight. This whole matter will then have to be shelved.”

The call to dinner came. Deep told the troika to go on ahead and that they would be along in a minute. Then he asked Sayan: “Dada, about the vigil at the temple. Remember what the Imam said? Phenomena such as this might not be allowed to be witnessed by a collective of people. It would be a one-man experience and it will then become a matter of one man’s belief. Nothing will be provable to the outside world.”

“Yes, I was thinking about that. If this were true, then who should that one man be?”

“Well, all along it has been Alak-da’s obsession.”

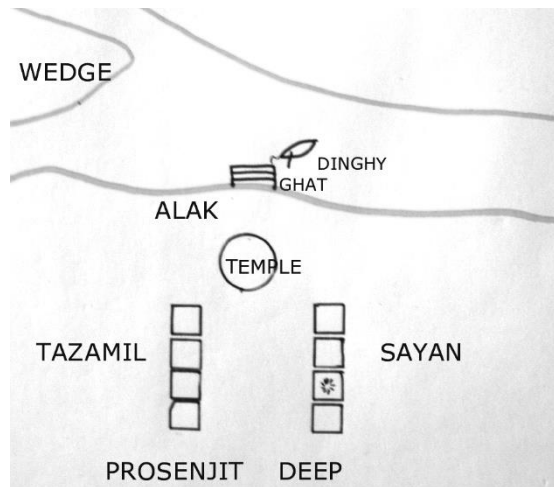
“Then Alak it is.”

11. CROSSING THE BAR

It was about 11 pm when they arrived at the temple. The temple sat in the woods. The moon was high and nearly full. But because of the spreading trees, the ground was an eerie patchwork of light and shade. The visibility on the river's surface was excellent. They made a complete circle around the temple, taking in the lay of the land. They saw the ghat behind the temple where a tethered dinghy was rocking in the river. The five now stood facing the courtyard, but keeping themselves behind some trees so as not to be seen by anyone. The temple was at the far end of the courtyard and on either side of the courtyard was a long shed with several rooms. So they were looking into a U-shaped complex.

Sayan had a canvas tote bag hanging from a strap around his left shoulder. From it he first took out several plastic toy whistles and gave one to each person. Then he took out a pair of binoculars and handed it to Alak, saying: "We borrowed it from a neighbor. Please be very careful with it. Use it to watch the river. Here, I will show you how to focus it."

Now they huddled and Sayan spoke whisperingly: "We will now spread out and take up our positions so as to give full visual coverage of all possible ways out from the temple grounds. See that candle light in one of the rooms? That must be where the sadhu lives. Now, you will maintain your positions until and unless you see something. If you see something, keep continuous watch. Follow along if you have to, keeping a discreet distance. If you perceive yourself in any danger, blow the whistle and keep blowing it. We will all converge on your location. Otherwise stay put until I blow my whistle three times. Then the vigil is over. Come back and we will meet right here where we are standing now. But this may be several hours.



“As to your posts. Prosenjit and Deep, you will cover the front side from here. Spread out so each of you have one-half of the frontage to watch. Tazamil and I will stand behind the two living quarters. Alak will be behind the temple, near the ghat. This way, the whole perimeter is covered. Any questions?”

There were no questions and each proceeded to his station.

The night progressed, the moon rose higher. The shadows in the patchwork on the ground deepened while the lighted portions became lighter. A variety of night sounds seemed to come from all directions. Alone, each person now had to keep his own company and draw his own strength from within himself. For it was necessary to draw strength. All the elements of a dark foreboding were here. And a slight chill in the air that was growing could give one the shivers. Thankfully, perhaps because of the breeze from the river, there were no mosquitoes or other pesky insects.

Sayan was standing behind the long shed that had the room with the candle light. He could see the faint light through a half-open window in the back of the room. After what seemed to be an interminable vigil, he looked at the radium-dial wristwatch he had borrowed from his father. It was just after twelve. Suddenly now, the candle light was no more. Sayan became alert. Prosenjit, who also saw this, became alert. He realized that he was the only person who had a clear view of the front door of that room.

A small, white-clad figure emerged and seemed to hesitate a moment at the door. The figure then turned towards the temple and continued to walk slowly towards it. Taking great care not to make any sounds, Prosenjit continued to reposition himself so he could keep the figure in view. It reached the temple and then bypassed it and proceeded towards the ghat. At this point Prosenjit lost him. However, he knew that the figure would now emerge in the field of view

of Alak. So he kept his position in case of further developments in his own purview.

Alak did indeed pick up the figure, from his hideout behind a tree trunk. He saw it emerge from the shade of the temple, look around and then proceed towards the ghat. As the figure passed close to him, Alak held his breath. He now saw clearly it was the sadhu of the station platform. The sadhu stopped right there and in that dim light, looked at the palm of his right hand and said out loud: “Haath ki rekhayen.” He then joined the palms of his two hands and brought them to the level of his forehead. Thus he did a pranam to someone in the sky. After nearly a minute of holding this position, the sadhu walked down to the dinghy, untied it and started rowing.

Alak came out from behind the trunk and moved to where he had a clear view of the river.

The sadhu was sailing towards the central point of the three rivers. The dinghy was moving fast, going downriver as it was. At the same time there started rising a river mist. The dinghy soon became just a blur within the mist. But it was still visible. It seemed to stop at the central place – the node. Then the mist engulfed it completely.

Alak debated what to do next. He remembered Sayan’s advice to hold his position until he heard the whistle. He therefore sat on a stair of the ghat, with his eyes peeled on where the dinghy had disappeared. He hoped the mist would lift and he would see the dinghy again. He tested the binoculars by focusing it at the wedge of land between Surma and Kushiara.

Unfortunately the mist only got worse. And keeping his eyes fixated on that place caused Alak to become drowsy. It was at any rate an hour of night when he would on any other night be deep asleep. Suddenly he was brought to by a sound – like the sound of a pebble thrown into the water right next to him. Alak was almost sure someone was trying to alert him to something. He looked around. There was none. He now saw that mist had lifted completely and the view of the river was crisp and clear. The dinghy was there, with the boatman in view. Alak realized that he might have missed the crucial moment by dozing off – the moment of transference. He trained the binoculars. The dinghy was moving towards the wedge. It docked there. Alak saw an unmistakable, tall athletic figure get off the dinghy, tie it up and walk into the forest. It was Shujon Majhi.

Tazamil had finally sat down, resting his back against a tree. He was fast

asleep when what sounded like the fluttering of a bird in the trees woke him up. He stood up and stretched. He walked near the river and surveyed it. He saw a dingy tied at the wedge. He did not recall having seen it there before. Then he saw a light in the forest, a short distance inland from the dinghy.

At 3 am Sayan blew his whistle and called an end. Prosenjit reported what he saw and Tazamil reported the dinghy at the wedge and the light in the forest. Sayan reported he saw the candle go out and Deep said he did not see anything. Alak reported he saw the sadhu's dinghy disappear in the mist. He said he had then dozed off and when he was awake again, the mist had cleared but there was no sign of the dinghy. As they headed home, he whispered in Sayan's ear: "Thank you."

12. ONE CLEAR CALL

Even at 8 am the boys were fast asleep on the roof terrace. Mrs. Shome asked Urmi and Urvi not to disturb them, as they were out late the previous night. Shortly after eight Sayan and then, gradually, the others were awakened by a commotion at the front door of the house. They came over to the edge of the roof and looked down. Standing at the door was Shujon Majhi and the children were happily crowding round him, holding his hand, screaming with joy: “Shujon-kaka has returned! Everybody come out and see, Shujon-kaka has returned! The magic wand works!”

And then the boys saw a most unexpected sight. The ever-poised, ever-dignified Anjoli-mashi came out of the house – Anjoli-mashi who had never even spoken a single word to Shujon Majhi – and held the lowly fishmonger’s hand and whispered something into his ear. As she did so, Shujon Majhi’s face lit up like a thousand candles.

Sayan looked at his brother and said: “Deep, our work here is done.”

Deep replied: “Yes, but we are not leaving until Mashima serves us a huge breakfast.”

At that Alak said: “I think I smell luchi and fried eggplants. Would that do?”

“Admirably,” said Deep.

In the event the breakfast was a truly a huge affair, made festive by the return of Shujon Majhi. In addition to the luchis and fried eggplants and a dry potato curry, there were omelets and cream of wheat cooked in milk into a savory sweet dish, with cashew nuts and raisins. The Bagchi brothers discreetly slunk into the background while enjoying the fare, letting Shujon Majhi be the guest-of-honor, so to speak. They saw Anjoli-mashi serve him the cream-of-wheat dish, called Mohonbhog, in that subtle but unmistakably loving manner in which a wife served a husband. However, the fishmonger seemed rather dazed by all the attention and looked somewhat out of sorts. The troika saw that it was Shujon Majhi all right, by all appearances – but not by his present demeanor.

Everyone joined the walk to the station to see Sayan and Deep off, including all the elders. Anjoli-mashi kept holding Shujon Majhi’s hand as if never wanting to let go again. Shujon Majhi himself continued to look overwhelmed by all this. Alak, for one, was most surprised. Shujon Majhi, the spinner of tales, speechless! Must be a temporary condition.

As they walked, Alak pulled forward and positioned himself between Sayan

and Deep. When he was sure no one could hear him, he said: “I think I should tell at least my parents and Anjoli-mashi who Shujon Majhi really is. Do you agree?”

“Yes, I agree,” said Sayan. “And you, Deep?”

Deep nodded and said: “At any rate, this secrecy is just for a short while. In a year or two India will be independent and he will be a national hero. He will be reinstated as a high level ICS Officer and surely be a pioneering leader of Free India.”

“That’s the thing,” said Alak. “I somehow find it anticlimactic that these two people would settle into everyday life like the rest of us, even if in a high station in society.”

“I do not see them in that role long,” Sayan said.

“In what role do you see them, Sayan?” asked Alak, most earnestly as if he were grabbing at a straw.

“Well, may be The Far will show itself to them again and they will not be able to resist. May be they will retire to the high Himalayas – just the two of them. May be they will blend into the white there again, like snow leopards.”

“That scenario satisfies me. I hope your vision comes true.”

“It is not my vision. It has already been written. Remember the ending of the story of the Dark Rebel?”

“You are right! We already know the ending of the story of Shujon Majhi!”

This time Deep spoke: “This is not so much the story of Shujon Majhi, Alak-da. It is the story of a continuous woman – the eternal female, if you like to use decorative language. It is the story of Tanafriti of the Three Niles. Of the Punagiri tigress with three cubs. Of the Tibetan woman with three yaks. Alak-da, the story is right where you are. From eon to eon, it is the story of Anjoli-mashi in the House of Three Banyans.”

Alak clasped the arms of the two brothers with his two hands and steadied himself.

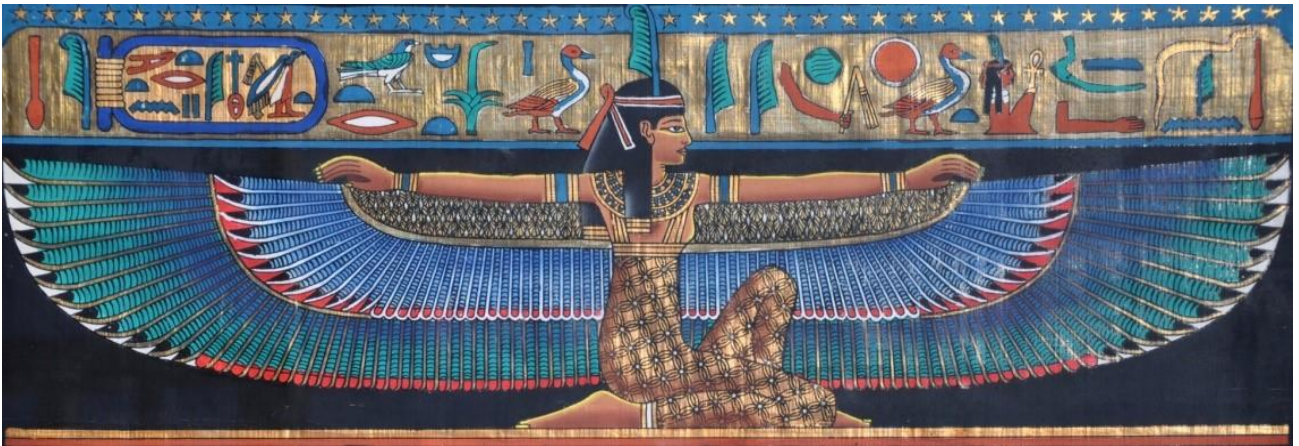
As the Bagchi brothers entered the platform, they looked sadly down at the empty bench at the end. Sayan had one last thing he wanted to do. As the turn came for him and Deep to say goodbye to Anjoli-mashi, Sayan asked, in a low voice that only she could hear: “Is this really what you want, Anjoli-mashi?”

Now she put her arms most lovingly around the boys’ shoulders, pulling them close to her. Then she recited that entire stanza:

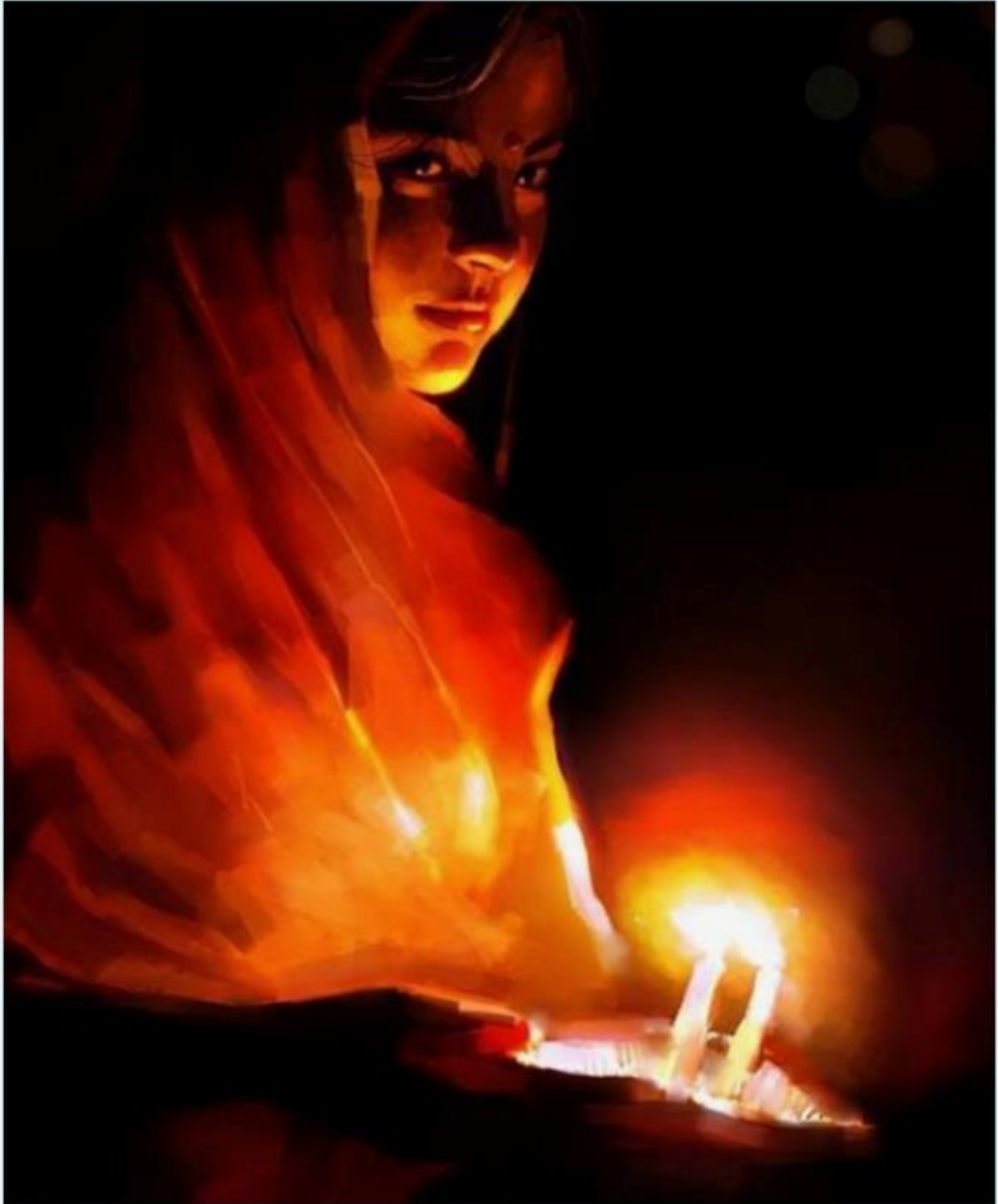
*“Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea, ...”*

With heavy hearts the brothers got into the train and sat facing each other at a window opening on the platform. Everyone on the platform crowded round this window. The train started to move. Everyone started their last wave-goodbyes. The whole time, Shujon Majhi had not said anything. Now, Anjoli-mashi nudged him: “Shujon, say goodbye to the boys.”

The train was gaining speed. Shujon Majhi, seeing the opportunity to say something slip away fast, at last managed two words as he raised his right hand in blessing: “Kolyan ho!”



LUNGLEI DIWALI



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In the summer of 1948 the Bagchi brothers were sixteen and fourteen, respectively. They rebelled against their nicknames Lalu and Bhulu, which they said were silly and undistinguished. From here on they would go by their official names, Sayantan and Sayandeep. But they agreed to have these rather long names abbreviated and to be called Sayan and Deep.

A friend of their father, one Bimal Mitra, had come to Silchar, visiting for a day. Bimal-kaku or Uncle Bimal, as the brothers called him, was as close to them as a blood uncle. He was also fairly young – in his thirties – and could converse with the brothers with great ease and camaraderie. Bimal Mitra was a government contractor who led a very adventurous life. He built roads and bridges and viaducts in the rugged and remote Lushai Hills. His family lived in Shillong. He himself lived in camps and tents at the work site as needed. He moved about in his military surplus Willys Jeep which he drove himself. He carried a rifle in his Jeep. Sometimes he hunted. At the present time he lived in the hills outside Lunglei where he had established a work camp.

That afternoon Bimal-kaku and the two brothers went for a walk by the Barak, near the landing in Malugram. The brothers asked about life in Lunglei, especially the adventure aspect of it. Bimal-kaku saw his chance. He had long been trying to take the boys to the Lushai Hills to give them a taste of the free-spirited frontier life, but for one reason or another such a visit did not materialize. Bimal-kaku felt that this was because the brothers had more interesting invitations. But he now had the bait and he was going to deploy it most tactfully. And he was going to savor doing it.

He told the brothers several anecdotes about his working life in the Lushai Hills and watched the brothers listen in rapt attention. He had got them where he wanted them. He now laid the bait: “Of course, none of these compares to the mysterious lights on a hill on the night of Diwali that I have heard about.”

It worked. Both brothers asked almost simultaneously: “What lights?!”

And now Bimal-kaku slowly paid out his fishing line.



Diwali, the famous festival of lamps, falls in the later part of October or in early November. People adorn their homes with rows upon rows of oil-wick lamps. It becomes an undeclared competition among the neighborhood homes as to which can outdo the others. Then there are the fireworks. Firecrackers, howitzers, cherry bombs and such things of all description are deployed. It is of course the young of the household who engage in these activities. The older generation watches in admiration and remains vigilant as to fire safety.

For the past three years in a row on the Diwali night, on the ridge of a small hill just

at the edge of Lunglei, people have seen display of strange lights. There appear tall, fluid and bendable pillars of light – a few at least – moving haphazardly along the ridge from one side to the other. When two pillars going in opposite directions meet, they stop a while. The lights are seen for a period between seven pm and nine pm and then they disappear. So there is never any opportunity to go to the location and investigate after the lights have been first sighted. From the town to the ridge, it is more than two hours' hike along a tortuous, up and down trail. The hike is longer and more difficult when it is dark.

Of course, theories abound – most of it to do with jungle nymphs and spirits. Why just on the night of Diwali though? The Lushais say these must be Hindu spirits. What are they doing on the hill? Putting on the Diwali display. One theory has it that some trees start to glow and move about. Another – more scientific-sounding – theory says they are simply a form of will o' the wisp.

Last Diwali, on the third year of the sightings that is, a few young men got together and decided to hold a vigil at the very ridge. They went up there while it was still daylight and camped out. The citizens kept watch from the town. At about midnight, since absolutely nothing happened, the young men returned. They said: "It did not happen this year, probably because we were there."

"Who said it did not happen?! We saw it plainly – just like the past years," said one person who met the returning young men at the edge of the town.

Early next morning as soon as it was light, the young men went back to the ridge and searched the ground with a fine-tooth comb. They could find no signs of anything out-of-place or foreign to the place.

After that it was concluded that this mystery was unsolvable and ought to be left alone. Since there was nothing malevolent about the incidents, why not let the legend be and grow? An unsolved mystery is better than no mystery and certainly more interesting than a solved mystery.



Just as he had anticipated, Bimal Mitra received a message from the Bagchi brothers in early September. They would like to come visit him during Diwali if it would be convenient. Bimal-kaku sent back a brief message: "Leave everything to me."

A few days before Diwali a contractor friend of Bimal-kaku who was traveling by car from Silchar to Aizawl picked up the Bagchi brothers very early in the morning. They stopped at Vairengte and the gentleman treated the brothers to tea and samosas. The brothers were most taken by the lay of the land – mountainous, undulating and densely forested. The lush green played against the sparkling blue of the sky. They had

the sense of having come to a lost world and equally strongly, of having left the everyday world of theirs. A deep sense of mystery was already taking hold of them – and they were fully receptive to it.

In the evening they arrived at the Circuit House in Aizawl, where Bimal-kaku was waiting. He said: “We will spend the night here. We’ll spend tomorrow sightseeing in Aizawl. The following morning we’ll go to Lunglei. You will still have two nights before Diwali.”

And thus it was that the brothers toured the spectacular hill town of Aizawl, all the time with a deepening sense of some impending event. When they came to Lunglei and were settled in the rustic but comfortable camp, it was almost as though they had lost all the bearings of their habitual, predictable and structured Silchar life. They were rudderless and compassless and without a sense of the time of day. This was unlike any vacation they ever had. Even the food was very different, though most delicious. They liked the chicken jhol cooked by the laborers in a huge community cauldron, accompanied by rice cooked in the hollow of green bamboo shaft. The food – the jungle food – tasted even better when eaten around a campfire, off banana leaves and accompanied by the strange jungle stories of the hardy laborers who had taken quite a fancy to the two educated city boys.

To the complete amazement of the brothers, Bimal-kaku agreed to let just the two of them hold a night vigil on the ridge. The Bagchi brothers were not used to such laxity of parental vigilance. Little did they know that Bimal-kaku had arranged for two armed laborers to stealthily follow the boys all the way. These were local Lushais who knew the jungle. They could follow the brothers closely without ever being spotted.

So about 2:30 pm in the afternoon when it was still light, the brothers set out after a late lunch. They would get a feel for the lay of the land at the ridge and then settle down by around 5:30 pm when it would be dusk. The camp cook prepared for them some snacks and fruits and a canteen of water – a metal bottle with felt all around it, and with a shoulder strap. The food pack and a sturdy flashlight were placed in a rucksack. Additionally the brothers carried in their hand an over-sized hurricane lantern. The laborers had fastened a shiny wok to the lantern so as to concentrate the light in one direction. This way the light would be visible even at this distance, they said. The plan was to light the lantern and wave it from time to time so that viewers back in the camp could use this as a kind of reference signal. For the purpose of keeping track of time, the brothers borrowed Bimal-kaku’s radium-dial wristwatch that could be read in the dark. The adventure was afoot.



From the foot of the hill it was an easy hike up to the ridge – along a faint trail. As the brothers gained the highest point they saw that the trail had continued down the other side and on to the flat land where, about half a mile away, there began a dense jungle. Presently they saw four young people emerge from the jungle and approach the hill. They could be headed nowhere else but to the ridge! This caused the brothers some consternation because they did not want a big commotion on the ridge at this juncture. They hoped the group would continue on towards Lunglei.

About 200 meters of the ridge was straight and this is where the action was said to be. So the brothers decided to walk this straight section from one end to the other, inspecting it thoroughly. Just as they finished doing so and found nothing of any significance, the foursome from the jungle gained the ridge. There were two young boys, followed by a little girl and then a teenage girl. They looked like Bengalis. As they came close Sayan said in Bengali: “Hello! We are from Lunglei, out on a hike. What brings you here?”

The oldest of the group, the teenage girl, was about Sayan’s age. She replied in Bengali: “My name is Shikha. The little girl is Dipali. The boys are Shikhar and Giri. We’ve come to watch the Lunglei Diwali lights from the ridge. There are several Hindu homes facing this way and they put on quite a show.”

“My name is Sayantan and this is my brother Sayandeep. Actually, we had the same idea. So perhaps we can watch the lights together. Have you heard of any other light displays in this area? Does anyone put on any displays on this hill, for example?”

“If anyone did, it would not be visible from our village which is on the far side of the jungle, completely surrounded by tall tress – so much so that you cannot see the village from here. Why, has anyone from Lunglei seen any such thing?” the girl replied.

Sayan decided it was best to come clean now: “Well, there are some stories about strange lights on this ridge on the Diwali night – and quite frankly, we came here to investigate.”

“Good. Then tell us what to do and we will help you investigate.”

“But would not your parents worry if you are out late? We have to be here at least until 10 pm,” asked Deep.

“Not when the four of us are together. They will assume we are watching the Lunglei Diwali.”

Dipali, the little girl, now turned to Deep and asked: “What does Sayandeep mean?”

“It means the Votive Evening Lamp,” replied Deep.

“Evening lamps? That is so beautiful and appropriate – especially on this night!”

Even as these preliminaries were going on, Sayan felt a strange new feeling rising

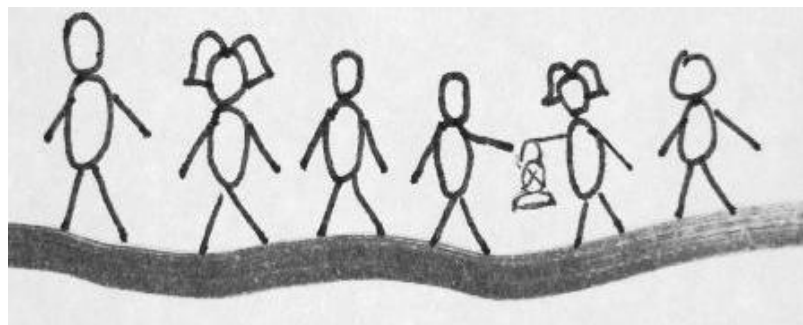
within him. He felt strongly drawn to Shikha and not just because she had a captivating sweetness about her face. He felt some unfamiliar magnetism reach deep down within him. He simply could not resist this attraction.



When it began to get dark Sayan explained the plan. As Deep lit the hurricane lantern, Sayan said to the group: “First we will walk with this lantern from one end of the ridge to the other, but will space ourselves out on the ridge. There are people watching the ridge from Lunglei and this carrying of the lantern along the ridge will be a reference signal for them. If they sight anything strange, they can say it was so many minutes after the lantern; it was about the middle of the ridge; etc. So I will go first, carrying the lantern, and Deep will be the last. The four of you please space yourselves out between us and keep observing all around you.”

When they started the procession, Deep noticed that the four comers finagled to arrange themselves in exactly the same sequence in which they came up the hill – first the two young boys, followed by the little girl, followed by the teenage girl: Giri, Shikhar, Dipali and Shikha. Sayan was too preoccupied to notice anything now. The party walked from one end of the ridge to the other and then retraced their steps. After that the six spread out on the ridge, covering its entire length and sat down to keep vigil. The lantern was extinguished.

Nothing unusual happened. Night owls hooted and cicadas kept up a steady noise level. Around about 8 o’clock they assembled again in the middle of the ridge. Deep said: “I want to try to create another reference point for the people in Lunglei. The four of you please stand in a row along the ridge, the tallest first, the next tallest next, and so on. Then my Dada will stand next to the tallest person, and I will stand next to the shortest person. This way, the two of us will bracket the four of you. Then we will pass the lantern from one end to the other several times – its beam pointing to Lunglei.”



At this suggestion which had not been previously discussed with him, Sayan was rather mystified. But he made nothing of this – his mind was full of Shikha. Anyway,

the suggested formation was made and the lantern was lit again. It was then passed on from hand to hand, thus traveling back and forth across the formation several times. Deep noted the time: It was 8:10 pm. After that Sayan said: “Let us split up two to a team and patrol the ridge. We will all be in each other’s view. If you see something out-of-place, raise your hands and wave and we will all come.”

Upon this Shikha moved closer to Sayan and the two of them formed the first group. Deep and Giri walked together, leaving Shikhar and Dipali to form the last group.

The vigil continued this way until 10 pm at which time the whole group gathered again. Sayan said: “Well, the crucial period is well over and we have not seen anything. Now the question is: Do we want to hike back in the dark or do we want to wait here for the first light? Deep and I have both the lantern and a flashlight. So we can go back now if we want to. But we do not wish to leave you here alone.”

“We are very familiar with this trail and it is no problem for us to return to the village. So we can say goodbyes now,” replied Shikha.

Sayan reached within the rucksack and found that there were four oranges. He offered these to the four and they gladly accepted. After that goodbyes were said and the two groups started on their ways. The foursome walked in the same sequence in which they came.

Sayan suddenly felt a sense of complete emptiness within him. There was no closure. Shikha was gone and nothing of her remained with him. He would never see her again in his life. He was silent the whole way to the camp – that emptiness gnawing at him.



A little after 12 midnight they arrived back at the camp and found a group of laborers waiting for them rather excitedly, as was also Bimal-kaku. But Sayan made his apologies and went straight to bed. Deep listened to what the observers in the camp saw and asked several questions to elicit details. The more he heard, the more satisfied he felt. He had a theory and it was being corroborated by the observers “on the ground.” However, Deep said nothing about their meeting the young people on the ridge. He left the impression that they saw nothing unusual on the ridge and that the mystery had eluded them.

By 6 am next morning the brothers were up and about. They had large mugs of strong tea accompanied by “bon ruti” – baked sweet rolls with raisins in them, what some know as brioche. Sayan was completely out of sorts, however. Deep observed him for a while as he formulated some plan in his mind. When this was done, he said: “Dada, the village is only a short hike from that ridge. Let us go and visit them. It must be a small village and it should be quite easy to find the four. And we will be back in time

for noon rice.”

It seemed as though Sayan had never heard such a welcome suggestion in his entire life. He stood up and perked up. They took a canteen of water and were off.

Nearly two hours later they were over the hill and at the entry to the jungle. The narrow trail continued through the dense jungle – barely one-person wide. After about fifteen minutes, it opened up almost suddenly on to a clearing that looked like the village square – a square field edged by a few bamboo-and-mud cottages. One of these was a shop. It was one of those multipurpose shops that stocked a little of every need: rice, daal, round balls of soap for washing clothes, candles and so on. And it was also a tea shop. In front were two low wood benches on which three people were now sitting. Two were sipping tea. The third, a very old man with a profusion of long white hair and long beard, was puffing on a hukkah. His eyebrows were so bushy that his eyes were completely covered up. He peered from behind them. The shopkeeper was also visible inside. They all looked to be Lushais.

The brothers approached them. Seeing that Sayan was still lost in thought, Deep spoke in Hindi: “Hello! We’ve come from over the hill. We are looking for some boys and girls we met yesterday. Their names are Shikha and Giri and ... ”

“Say no more,” said Hukkah. “Just continue along the trail past the square until you see a bamboo grove on your right. There a narrow lane veers off to the right. Take that. It ends in a mud-walled compound surrounding a mud-and-bamboo house. That’s where the children live.”

“You mean they all live in the same house?”

“Of course. They are brothers and sisters.”

Hukkah invited them to stop for a cup of tea, but Deep declined, with profuse thanks. The brothers started towards the bamboo grove.

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The door was answered by Shikha. If she was surprised to see the two boys from last night show up right at her doorstep, she hid this very gracefully. She invited them in warmly as though they were long-expected guests. The boys were introduced to the parents. The father, a very ascetic-looking man, wore a namavali – an orange shawl covered all over with printed prayers in black, in Sanskrit script. He must be some kind of a holy man, thought Deep.

The mother was a most graceful lady in red-bordered white sari, with a large vermilion dot on her forehead. After speaking to the boys for a bit she retired to the kitchen to make them tea. In due course the other three children also turned up from various parts of the house.

After the tea and coconut sweets, Shikha invited Sayan to come and see her vegetable garden. She then asked Deep to join. The latter used appropriate tact and said he would stay here and converse with the others.

Once in the garden Sayan made bold to speak, somewhat awkwardly: “We may not have a chance to speak alone again and so I would like to say that I very much want to keep in touch with you.”

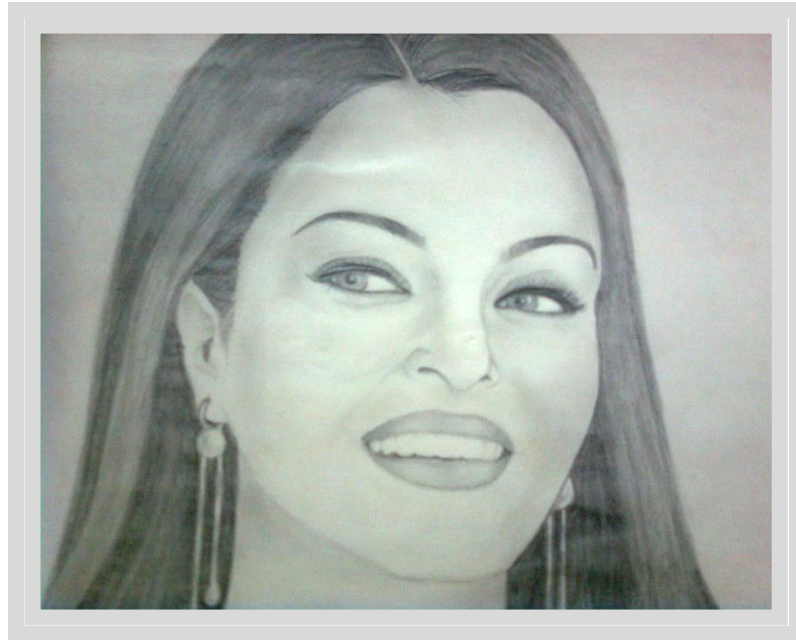
“And I with you.”

“Well, actually, I mean forever.”

“That’s what I meant as well.”

“So it is completely settled – you and I – I mean ... belonging to each other – forever?”

“Completely settled, Sayan.”



Sanchari De

The two then discussed how Sayan could come to Lunglei frequently and Shikha could visit her relatives in Silchar on festive holidays. In addition Shikha could write to Sayan and arrange for the letter to be taken to Lunglei and mailed. Unfortunately, Shikha explained, no postman came to this village and so Sayan could not write back to Shikha. “Never mind that,” said Sayan. “I will write in care of my uncle and he will send the letter on to you through one of his workmen.” An entire plan was thus laid out. They both recognized within themselves that they had to continue this contact for only a few years, after which they would be of marriageable age. Then they could be together forever.

When the two came back into the house, Deep saw that Sayan was positively radiant. After exchange of elaborate pleasantries the brothers took leave.

As they were passing in front of the shop again, Hukkah was still there. He greeted the boys and asked: “Did you have a good visit?”

“Yes, very good,” replied Sayan.

Just as they were leaving, Sayan walking on ahead, Hukkah signaled to Deep to pause. He then whispered: “Little Boy, you know, don’t you?”

Deep turned his handsome visage full on Hukkah, looked him straight in the eyes – such as they were – and said: “Yes.”

Sayan turned and saw this, but could not understand what this private exchange was about. His mind was elsewhere. He was walking on Cloud Nine.

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That evening, after a sumptuous meal, the laborers sat round a roaring campfire. Some were smoking bidis, some were chewing pan. Bimal-kaku was busy in his tent looking over some blueprints of a bridge he was building. The boys came and joined the laborers. Deep asked: “Can anyone tell us anything about the village in the jungle over across that ridge?”

“The abandoned village, you mean?” said the cook who was a long-timer in this area. “It was a thriving village of about a dozen families up until a few years ago. Now nothing remains of it. Only a few scattered mounds of mud and bamboo where neat homes once stood.”

Sayan sat up, startled. But Deep softly touched him, signaling for him to remain silent. He then told the cook: “Go on.”

“Well, there was a Hindu priest who officiated in many functions in Lunglei. A wealthy citizen here had a plot of land in that village. So he built the priest a home there, for free. That his how the priest came to live in the village, with his wife and four children. The rest of the villagers were local Lushais. It was a most amicable place, as though the whole village were a single, happy family. The four children were the only children in the village and every home claimed them as their children.

“Now, about four years ago, the children hatched a plan. They were going to place rows of Diwali lamps on that ridge to make a grand display for all of Lunglei to see. Before Diwali came the Durga Puja festival. The children went to visit relatives in Silchar. They would enjoy the Puja and then buy a large quantity of the Diwali clay lamps from the big market there town before returning.

“On the fourth day of the Puja is the Immersion Ceremony – as you boys well know. The clay images of the goddess are loaded on river rafts, taken to the middle of the river

and consigned to water. You also know what a huge pandemonium this is, with the unruly crowd onshore, the overloaded river rafts crowding each other in the river, and so on. The four children were on one of these rafts on which fire broke out. People saw the children on fire, first flaming out and then writhing and then frantically jumping into the water. Because of the great commotion there, no rescuers could get to them in time. They were burnt and then they drowned.

“That’s pretty much the story. When the parents got the news they seemed to take this very calmly. But that night they killed themselves. After that the villagers became completely dispirited and one by one, left that accursed village.”



Bimal-kaku spoke to the two men he had sent to look after the boys on the Diwali night. They did not see the lights. What did the boys do? Well, most of the time they were walking back and forth along the ridge, separately. Each was talking to himself. The two men thought this was very strange. But not as strange as when they saw the two passing a lit hurricane lantern from one to the other across a distance of some twenty feet! The lantern just seemed to float in the air as it made its way from one to the other! The men were so confused by the sight that they decided they had to have been hallucinating. They swore, however, that they were not drinking.

“That must be it, hallucination,” said Bimal-kaku to them.



Two days later the boys were on their way home. The laborers bade warm goodbyes and implored them to come again. Bimal-kaku would drive them all the way to Silchar this time. As before, they stopped in Aizawl. They would start for Silchar the following morning. In Aizawl the boys went out for an evening walk, looking at the twinkling lights on the distant hills.

“Deep, I am such a fool. I missed everything.”

“Dada, you are not a fool. But you were distracted. You missed every sign. What was happening was clear from the beginning.”

“Beginning when?”

“Beginning when the foursome came up to us at the ridge. You will remember the exact order in which they came in a single file – because that was the exact way they left and also the exact order in which they were walking on the ridge.”

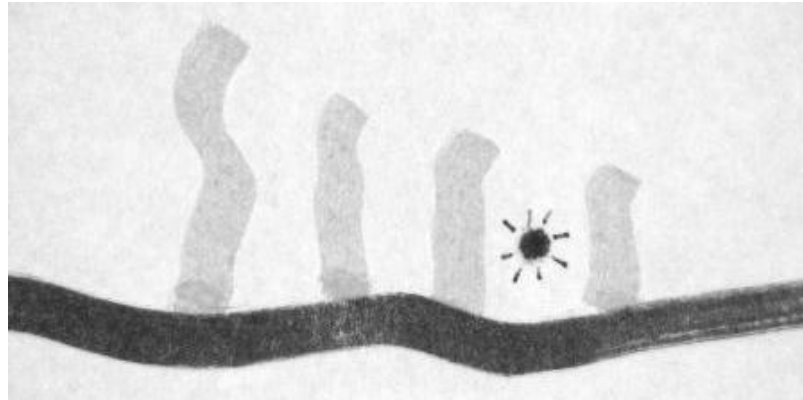
“Indeed I do. Let me see: Giri, Shikhar, Dipali and then Shikha.”

“OK, now remove the invisible commas between those names and make them into a single expression.”

“Let me see – Giri shikhar dipali shikha. Hill top diwali flame. Oh my God, Deep,

they were telling us that *they* were the lights!”

“Not only that. They tried to clue us in by asking what the meaning of *my* name was!”



Deep continued: “And when we returned, the people in the camp told me that they saw the lights this year as well. And at about 8:10 pm, they saw the lights on the hill line up in an ascending sequence of height. A point of light was going back and forth across this formation.”

“So that was your experiment! But Deep, that means that you knew from the beginning that these were not humans!”

“Of course.”

Sayan was speechless. He somehow managed to ask: “And you wanted us to go to the village in the morning why?”

“Dada, you were distracted. You were badly smitten. I thought that if we went to the jungle and saw there was no village, then that would be the best way for you to snap out of it.”

“But instead we saw that village was full of people. You knew all along that these were not humans?”

“I did.”

“That’s what Hukkah asked you?”

“Right.”

Sayan looked at his younger brother with a new-found level of respect. As he was pondering what to say to his brother by way of expressing gratitude and admiration, the latter spoke: “Dada, she will come. At another time, with a different name. But it will be her and you will spend the rest of your life with her.”

“How do you know this?”

“I can feel the future.”

Sayan saw no reason to not believe his brother implicitly. Suddenly he felt the great sadness that had got hold of him ever since he heard the story of the village lift. In its

place a luminous hope was ascending – a hope bearing the name Shikha. He had come here to solve a mystery. In the bargain, he stumbled upon the greatest mystery ever in his life – thus far or henceforth: first love.

Tamam shud